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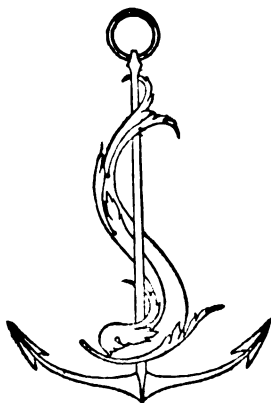
THE SMOKING LEG
And Other Stories

THE SMOKING LEG

And Other Stories

By

JOHN METCALFE



GARDEN CITY
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
NEW YORK
1926

THE
COUNTRY LIFE PRESS

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AT THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.**

FIRST EDITION

To
CARL THOMPSON WALKER

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THE SMOKING LEG
And Other Stories

THE SMOKING LEG

I

THE lascar fellow whom Geoghan, the up-country "doctor," had tended so assiduously was lanky and long but otherwise not remarkable. He had come hurtling into Geoghan's little compound one afternoon with bloodshot eyes and intermittent yells and then had fallen conveniently down the saw-pit at the side of the verandah.

Geoghan got him out and pinched him carefully all over to see where he was hurt. When he pinched his knee the lascar shrieked. "Ah," said Geoghan, "Tummy-ache, eh? Is it very bad?" He pinched the knee again and this time the lascar summoned strength to spit at him.

"I don't like the look of him at all," said the doctor to his man, Mohammed Ali. "That spitting was a bad symptom; it's so unusual in lascars. We'd better take him inside."

Now Geoghan had the reputation of being mad, but of this, of course, the lascar could know nothing, and by the time that he had spent ten days beneath the doctor's roof, drinking his *soda pani* and sharing his *curry bat*, he had formed quite a strong attachment for his protector. As lascars go he was really a very nice lascar, and after all he was little more than a boy. His name was Abdullah Jan.

His affection for Geoghan, however, was somewhat severely strained when on the eleventh day the doctor tied him securely down upon a sofa, spread a white

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sheet underneath him, and opened out a large, black-leather case of glittering knives.

"No," stammered Abdullah Jan, who was by profession a *khalassi* and could speak a little English, "Ah, no!"

"Now, don't fuss," Geoghan commanded him. "It only worries me. And I don't suppose it'll hurt much at all." He removed the splints and bandages in which he had encased the lascar's right leg, and then left the room only to return almost immediately with a large metal cash-box, which he placed upon a low table next his case of instruments. By this time Abdullah Jan was shrieking.

Geoghan tapped him smartly over the head with the butt of his twelve-bore and the shrieking ceased.

When Abdullah Jan recovered consciousness, the white sheet was smeared with blood, a strong smell of whisky filled the room, and the cash-box lay open and empty upon the floor. The injured leg had been bound up again but was hurting violently in a new place just above, and slightly on the inner side of, the knee. Geoghan was rinsing his knives.

"Good boy," said the doctor, looking up and eyeing his patient. "Feel comfy?"

The lascar's eyes goggled with the intensity of feelings he was unable to express, and presently a low but vicious grunting sound issued from his throat. When Geoghan, to silence him, stuffed some bandage in his mouth, Abdullah Jan tried to bite.

The doctor then took a seat by the side of the couch,

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poured himself out another glass of whisky, and began to chat.

He told the lascar boy that in about a month his knee would be so well that he could take to sea again, supposing, of course, that the private reasons which had impelled him so forcibly up country had by that time ceased to operate. It would be necessary, however, for Abdullah Jan to get his leg overhauled on arrival in London, and to that end Geoghan himself would give him the address of a competent surgeon to whom in addition he had already posted an explanatory note.

When the doctor had told his patient all this, he told it him again, and as soon as the second recital was completed, he recommenced a third time, more earnestly and in a slightly higher key, but if anything rather less distinctly. Before each repetition he swallowed a glass of whisky, and at the end of the ninth his throat became so hoarse that he desisted and suffered Mohammed to carry him to bed. Abdullah Jan remained strapped to the couch.

During the next fortnight the lascar boy's arms were kept tied together behind his back lest he should scratch the healing wound, and each day Geoghan would sit beside him and chant his original remarks, to which, however, he made from time to time additions in order to sustain the interest.

But through all the ravings of the whisky-sodden little maniac there ran as a constant burden or refrain a single theme—the visit which the lascar must one day pay to that surgeon far away in London. “Don't

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you let any lousy sea-cook of a ship's doctor start his monkeying with you, Abdullah my boy," he would shout with his yellow eyes aflame. "That knee of yours is *jadu*. Get me? There's a bad spirit in it, and there's only one man in the world can take it out, and that's my old chum, Freddy Shaw." Now Mohammed was unable effectively to act as an interpreter, and owing to Geoghan's comparative ignorance of the *bat* and his patient's slight acquaintance with English the communication of ideas was a lengthy process, but the constant iteration took effect at last, and when one night Abdullah Jan developed a raging fever and approached so nigh unto the gates of death that he shouted Shaw's address in his delirium, the doctor could hardly contain himself for joy.

In a couple of days Geoghan's protégé was out of the fever, and a week later was so much better that he was able to lie still and roll his eyes appreciatively when Mohammed and his master knelt by his couch and proceeded to unbind his arms.

When the lascar's hands were free, the doctor placed in them with much solemnity a two-foot manilla envelope sealed with green wax and decorated with pink ribbon. Inside this envelope, said Geoghan, was a letter of recommendation which would secure for his patient a berth on the *Burmah Queen* at Rangoon. He further observed that as the ship was not due to sail till the year after next, Abdullah Jan would have ample time to bid an affectionate farewell to his unmarried aunts and then to proceed down river in a sardine-tin which would be lent him for that purpose.

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To these remarks Abdullah Jan made no effective response, but as soon as Geoghan, who had sat up all night drinking whisky, staggered out of the room to fetch some more, a faint and anticipatory smile flickered for an instant about his face.

He waited until Mohammed had withdrawn to superintend the cooking of the midday rice, and then, turning the key upon him as softly as he could and cautiously removing from its hook upon the wall a long and ugly-looking *kris*, limped silently after his benefactor with the weapon in his hand.

Now Geoghan, when the lascar came upon him, was bent low over a demijohn at the end of a narrow passage, and was so intent upon his work that until the *kris* entered between his legs he was completely unaware of Abdullah Jan's designs. As the knife travelled up his body, however, in a course roughly parallel to his spine, he uttered shriek upon shriek, and it was not until the point of the long spear issued at last through his mouth in a sudden froth of blood that the appalling outcry ceased and with a final convulsive shudder he lay still.

Abdullah Jan, who had no quarrel with Mohammed, then fled from the house as quickly as his lameness would allow, and by the time that the first buzzing *machar* had settled upon Geoghan's corpse had already placed some two hundred yards or more of tangled forest between the little compound and himself.

Presently, being satisfied that his escape had been made good, he sat down in a little thicket, and, glanc-

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ing downwards at his injured leg, suffered himself to weep a little.

Suddenly his sobs ended in a gulp of terror and dismay. A sharp, throbbing pain twisted his features into a grimace and by a strange instinct of fear he covered his knee with both hands, dreading to look upon the wound.

Before long the throbbing grew less violent, and then Abdullah Jan became able to take note of a new and appalling characteristic in the discomfort which it still produced. The pain was *round*, perfectly round, with a complete and superlative roundness such as he could never have imagined.

Trembling, he removed his hands and gazed. Above the right knee and on the inner side of the leg was a raised area of livid flesh, and its outline was as absolutely, as consummately circular as is the edge of a rupee newly minted or the full moon on a chilly night.

Gasping in mingled anguish and affright, the lascar struggled to his feet and cast himself once more into the shadows of the forest with a wild and reverberating yell.

II

Three months later a seedy, troubled man in a worn solano suit sat swinging his legs at a desk in a little freeboard shanty somewhere on the coast near Chittagong.

He was Lloyd's Agent, and behind him, also at a desk, sat the other seedy, troubled man who acted as his clerk.

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"Talking," said the Agent, "of ocean mysteries and all that, it's my belief, Watkins, that they come in waves, if you get me, like an epidemic."

"Yes, Fellowes, I quite agree with you," said the clerk, who was much too tired to be brilliant.

"Look at all these mysterious disappearances of ships. Quite a crop of 'em. No less than six in half as many months, and all more or less in the same place. Let's see, there was the *Bombay Star*, the *Ocean Queen*, and the *Josiah C. Pratt*—no, I'm wrong, I should say the *Leonidas*—and two or three more. The *Mohican*, she was the first, I think."

"No," said Mr. Watkins with a weary shudder. "The old *Rosy Dawn* was the first. I remember it because of that mad lascar fellow out of the jungle who was so keen on signing out for England. No skipper would have him because of his gammy leg."

"What happened to him?" inquired Fellowes languidly.

"I think he got aboard at last as a stowaway. Carfax, skipper of the *Mighty Hurry*, met the *Rosy Dawn* one day out and told me something about it when he dropped in the other day."

"You intrigue me, Watkins," said the Agent, displaying animation, "even to the point of giving me an idea about it. There was that rummy signal from the *Leonidas* off the Maldives—the last we ever heard of her. Surely you haven't forgotten. Said they'd sighted a ship to the nor'ard—on fire. Only managed to save one lascar raving mad. Didn't give his name. Pity, that. I wonder if he was the same Johnny.

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Might have a mania for setting fire to things, you know."

"I wonder," said Mr. Watkins.

The Agent yawned and swung his legs again.

III

Once more the scene changes, and to the jungles of Bengal and the lonely Agency near Chittagong succeed the snowy decks and glittering brasswork of the liner *Elgin City*.

The strange events which took place aboard this vessel are recorded in the private log of its second mate, one Burrows, and occurred within the space of some sixteen hours, commencing with the portentous advent, and closing with the hardly less prodigious passing of a mysterious lascar, rescued under remarkable circumstances from drowning.

To this lascar, otherwise unnamed, the romantic Burrows has given a title which supplies the heading, in neat block capitals, of his five closely written pages—"The Man with the Smoking Leg."

It was, says the second mate, on the eighteenth of May and at precisely 10 A.M. that to the incredulous and horror-stricken gaze of well nigh every soul aboard there was presented a phenomenon, a bewildering miracle, monstrous and incredible.

In a scrupulously calm sea a vessel steaming some two miles to westward of the *Elgin City* and bearing on flag and funnel the familiar emblem of the triple dolphin was observed to pitch and toss as if caught

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suddenly by a hurricane, to shoot up a huge column of smoke amidships, to burst furiously into flame and almost the next second, with a final lurch and stagger, to dip her bows beneath the water and disappear from sight. Amongst the floating wreckage that marked the scene of the catastrophe a single human form was descried a quarter of an hour later clinging to a hen-coop. It was a man—a lascar, and apparently the sole survivor.

Hoisted carefully on board he subsided in a faint, and it was then, whilst he lay prone upon the deck, that his astonished rescuers noticed the condition of his right leg. It was swollen, of an angry reddish hue, and marked about the knee with curious lines and circles.

In response to the warm brandy forced between his lips, Abdullah Jan, for it was he, presently recovered, sneezed, and spoke. The interpreter who bent his head to catch the words shuddered with dismay. The prostrate man, it seemed, was beseeching them on no account to touch his leg because it smoked. A little later he broke into a sort of low, appealing, chant-like cry with a constantly repeated burden or refrain of which the import could not then be ascertained. Meanwhile, it was decided that he should be got below as soon as possible on the main ground that his language and behaviour generally spread alarm and despondency amongst the crew.

They bundled him into a vacant cabin next to the second mate's, set a guard at the door, and retired to discuss the situation.

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During the next few hours, says Burrows, excitement steadily increased and the wildest explanations of the morning's happenings were advanced, considered and abandoned, only to be replaced by theories more fantastic still.

Towards the evening the ship's doctor, Saville, appeared at the first saloon bar with a face exhibiting every sign of nervous strain.

The curiously demented lascar, it appeared, was progressing favourably save for the unaccountable condition of his leg. So far he had stubbornly refused to speak of the foundering of his ship or to give any detail of his own escape. The words, however, which formed the burden of his constantly repeated cry had been identified at last. "It's a name," said Saville, "and an English name. He keeps on calling out for 'Freddy Shaw'. . . ."

A little after midnight, Burrows, in his watch below, was roused by sounds of singing and excited voices in the lascar's cabin. Springing from his bunk he entered hastily upon Abdullah, the interpreter, and Saville.

A faint moon shone upon them through the port and showed the rescued man in a half-sitting posture. His chant-like cry had for the moment ceased abruptly and his mouth was still agape, but as Burrows closed the door behind him the singing recommenced. . . .

Hardly three-quarters of an hour later the doctor and second mate had run whimpering and giggling from the little cabin. Only after they had swallowed

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a couple of stiff brandies each could they tell Willoughby, the captain, their amazing tale.

The lascar, it appears, in a state of quasi-delirium, had first narrated the entire Geoghan episode, with the exception of the murder, and then gone on to relate adventures of storm and shipwreck, fire and horror, so incredible and wild that the interpreter himself had finally been fain to stop his ears and beg him to desist. And at the end of the appalling recital, when Saville had accidentally brushed against the Leg, it had emitted authentic smoke and flame.

"If Geoghan's had a hand in it anything may happen," said the doctor. "I know him well. We were at Bart.'s together—qualified same day. Then, seven years ago, he went whisky mad and went to live with the man-devil people up in the jungle."

The captain was concerned as to whether the Leg had been extinguished.

"It burnt for a time, sir," Burrows told him. "There was quite a lot of heat and flame, but it didn't seem to set anything alight. It went on burning till we sang to it."

"You sang to it?" asked Willoughby, appalled. "In heaven's name, what for?"

They told him then with the utmost conviction that Geoghan had bewitched the Leg and that, to calm and placate it, it was in fact necessary to sing to it, but that even this was very dangerous because the singing of the wrong song infuriated it utterly. The matter had been badly bungled on five or six ships as it was. The first two or three had fired astern and

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gone down with all hands; another, as they gathered, had "exploded," and the captain had himself seen what happened to the last. In each case it was remarkable that the lascar, after bringing destruction on his shipmates, had himself escaped.

Willoughby stroked his beard.

"And now, of course," concluded the evidently almost frantic Saville, "the story's got amongst the native crew, and you'll see there'll be trouble in the fo'c's'le."

Willoughby remarked that that would be a pity.

Now the captain was a man of prompt decision and determined action. From Tilbury to Rangoon, Southampton to Calcutta, his favourite and constantly repeated motto had given him the name of "Stitch-in-Time Willoughby." Judgment of him must in any case be qualified by consideration of his sense of duty to passengers and crew.

He proceeded forthwith, still stroking his beard, to the cabin of Abdullah Jan, remained there some five minutes, and then emerged looking perhaps a little haggard, but if anything more determined still.

It was at breakfast-time next morning that he informed the first saloon of the fate which had befallen the unfortunate Abdullah Jan. He had set up such a disturbance in the night that it had been decided to remove him to a bunk for'ard. In course of transit he had escaped from his attendants and jumped overboard. Raving mad, of course. The worst part of it was that the other lascars who had seen him drop had not given the alarm. . . .

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"Why not?" asked everyone.

"They thought he brought bad luck," said Willoughby. "A kind of Jonah. They didn't want him to be rescued. . . ."

"Perhaps he was pushed over," one suggested. "If they thought he was unlucky. There may have been foul play."

"No," said the captain steadily. "Oh, no. I shouldn't think there was foul play."

But both the doctor and the second mate remarked a certain bleakness in the eye of Willoughby.

And there, so far as Burrows's log can carry us, the amazing episode was abruptly ended. The Man with the Smoking Leg had come amongst them as a mystery. He had left them shrouded in a mystery greater still.

But Stitch-in-Time Willoughby, when he dropped anchor at Southampton, found that the extraordinary sinkings had continued, for now the tale of vanished ships had risen to thirteen.

IV

Mr. Frederick Shaw, M.B., was a bachelor in middle life and failing health. His doctor's plate which once had beamed refulgent in a West End square, now hung in gorgonzola-tinted turpitude upon the railings of a block of tenements near Shepherd's Bush. Behind it Mr. Shaw was stained and dingy too. His instincts had become increasingly crepuscular, his means of

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livelihood distinctly subterranean. His neck was creased and wizened like a piece of perished rubber and the collar which encircled it extremely dirty. Around his otherwise bald head there ran a scanty ring of rufous hair.

He was sitting in his dismal little living room with Geoghan's months-old letter in his hand and a look of consternation on his face.

"Good Lord!" he whispered thickly to himself and then again "Good Lord!"

He drained a glass of whisky. Whisky accounted for a great deal in the life of Mr. Shaw. It accounted for Shepherd's Bush and for his dirty collar. Presently it would undoubtedly account for Mr. Shaw himself.

Now the letter on arrival had interested him but mildly. It showed, of course, that Geoghan was far madder than had been supposed, but as for giving ground for serious and personal concern. . . . He had dismissed the matter with a raucous laugh and stuffed the letter underneath a pile of others waiting to be burned.

And now, this evening, he had fished it out again with trembling hand and read and re-read every word with eyes that goggled in amazement and alarm.

The trouble was that Geoghan's ravings had come true.

An hour had passed since in this very room Abdullah Jan had told his frantic tale of shipwreck and distress, had bared the horror of the Smoking Leg and then implored his aid.

Three days ago the lascar had been wrecked upon

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the Cornish coast. The sole survivor, he had been conveyed to London and placed within a Seaman's Home. There he had spent one night to sally forth next morning on his quest for Freddy Shaw.

It was absurd, ridiculous. Mr. Shaw's world, such as it was, fell about him in confusion as he thought on what had happened. There, in that old armchair of faded greenish plush he knew so well, the lascar boy had sat and told his tale. Then, stretching out his leg and resting it upon another chair, he had unwound the bandages that swathed it.

The thing had shone. Mr. Shaw was still quite unable to deny that it had shone. It had not burnt or smoked but simply shone. It had shone with a clear and lemon-coloured glow that seemed to fill the room.

His recollections of what followed were confused. He had collapsed, he supposed, upon his chair. Very probably he had fainted. When he recovered the lascar had considerably rewound the bandages about his leg. He had seemed hurt, however, on being asked to leave.

By dint of threats, entreaties, promises, he had been banished for a time, but he would certainly return. That was the trouble. The man was going to be a downright nuisance. To what an ebb would Mr. Shaw's already somewhat dubious reputation sink when niggers with effulgent nether limbs were daily at his door?

For the hundredth time at least he conned the words of Geoghan's merry note.

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"The jewel and the amulet are sewn up side by side. The jewel was an idol's eye. It is a ruby and worth at least £2,000, but precious queer in its behaviour. It's given me a lot of trouble in its time. The amulet is worth nothing except for its luck. I popped it in to give the chap a sporting chance and keep the jewel quiet. Wonder how the two'll hit it off together. Mind which you take out first. Well, there you are, old horse; don't say I never did you a good turn."

Mr. Shaw groaned aloud.

For several moments he sat lost in troubled thought, but presently his eyes reverted from the squalor of the faded parlour to the letter in his hands.

"Two thousand pounds," he murmured wonderingly.

Once more he groaned, but less emphatically: a dubious, one might almost say a pensive, groan.

V

Ten days have passed. The scene is still the doctor's dingy sitting room, the hour, half-past seven in the evening. Upon a couch, his eyes revolving in expectant dread, is stretched Abdullah Jan. In the opposite corner Mr. Shaw is steadying his nerves with another glass of whisky. Besides these two the room contains the usual sinister properties—sponges, a roll or two of lint, basin and towels, and, spread beneath the recumbent figure on the couch, a sheet of which the horrific and precarious whiteness might cause the stoutest heart to quail.

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It had come at last to this. It had come to this as Mr. Shaw had known it would. And, after all, what else could he have done? Send the man packing to some hospital against his will? Impossible. Call in some prying surgeon to nose about officiously in his affairs? Still more impossible. Mr. Shaw was conscious of certain features in the conduct of his practice which to a pharisaic mind must seem irregular. . . . Besides which, Wimpole Street would certainly appropriate a ruby when it saw one. He had gone so far, indeed, a few days ago as to procure Barrymore's opinion in the case. Barrymore lived callously dispensing squills and orange-tinted tonic for the kidneys from behind the counter of a dubious druggist's shop near Leicester Square. Together they had viewed the Leg and it had mocked them. It had lain doggo and assumed an air of guileless innocence. It was not even angry or inflamed, and as for shining . . . Its absolute normality was touching. Barrymore had cast a sneering eye upon the talus and gone out huffed.

And now the stage was set and all prepared for the enactment of the final scene. Mr. Shaw stood with his back towards his patient, spurring his failing courage to he knew not what.

He was about to operate upon the leg which Geoghan had bewitched, to plunge his impious knife into the flesh that he had seen to shine as pure gold. After all, had it shone? Ten days ago he could have sworn it; but latterly the thing had been so quiet. . . . Quite possibly he had only imagined that

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it shone. He was given to imagining things, he knew. Rats with pink tails—niggers with golden legs. Anyhow, he must do something, or the man would drive him mad. Just one more nip to steady one, and then—here went!

He administered the anæsthetic. Trembling, he made the first incision.

He paused a moment, half looking for some dire and shattering phenomenon. The perspiration broke upon his forehead.

Then, feverishly, he proceeded with his task. He had stipulated with himself that at the slightest hint of anything untoward or abnormal he would at once desist, but now a strange excitement gripped him. For a couple of minutes he worked in furious haste. . . .

Suddenly he stopped, and with a startled cry gazed wonderingly at what his scalpel had revealed.

There, sure enough, they lay within their prison-house of human flesh, the jewel and the amulet of Geoghan's letter. The ruby that was once an idol's eye, and by its side the jade-green charm that held its thwarted fury on the leash. Surely no stranger treasure ever slept in stranger *cache*.

For several seconds Mr. Shaw remained transfixed. Then he began to tremble. The curious excitement which till now had buoyed him up was ebbing fast away and in its place a stealthy terror grew upon him. He seemed to feel the imminence of some obscene and ghastly happening, the sudden menace of some deadly peril. . . .

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With starting eyeballs he gazed down upon the wound his knife had made. In no describable particular could he distinguish any change, but yet the thing was *nasty*—nasty with a peculiar and utter nastiness at which his soul revolted and his senses swooned. For a moment he had turned away to flee, but something wheeled him in his tracks and brought him back. Within his easy grasp there lay the costly gem. Its glitter chained his eyes. Half whimpering, he stretched forth his hand above the place, then sickly paused.

Which of those warring powers should he first remove—the blood-red jewel or the amulet? For several seconds he remained irresolute, his soul the battleground of fear and avarice. Then, with a half-smothered cry of terror, he thrust his fingers deep within the wound.

Unchecked by thought of Geoghan's warning words they closed about the crimson-shining stone and drew it forth.

There was a blinding flash. A choking volume of black smoke debouched upon the room. A rosy column of devouring light sprang upwards to the ceiling. An awful wail of anguish rent the air.

Then, echoing that fearful and despairing cry, Abdullah Jan awoke.

He rubbed his eyes and gazed. He could see nothing of the column of rosy light. He could see nothing of the rolling clouds of smoke nor of that terrible and searing flash from which they sprang.

He could see nothing of that hapless wretch on

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whom the suddenly unfettered power of the stone had wreaked at last its will.

He could see only a few curling wreaths of quickly fading vapour that marked the place where Mr. Shaw had stood.

But chuckling in the rifled storehouse of his knee there gleamed in kindly benison the jade-green amulet.

PICNIC

I

"THAT was a flash then, see it?"

The youth and the girl had risen from the bracken and waited for the peal of thunder.

Presently it reached them, hardly a peal in fact, only as yet a sort of flat and muffled bump, as though some monstrous troll had jarred his wooden trencher on the far horizon-rim. The curious, silent shudder of the air that followed had passed next moment, like the giant's breath, to lose itself along the leafy tunnels of the wood, but in its wake arose on every hand an urgent whispering of trees and the affrighted danger-cries of little birds.

"Damn!" said the boy. He was tallish, a small-boned, narrow-shouldered lad, some eighteen years of age. His face, good-looking in a facile, undistinguished style, was marred by a loose mouth and eyes too closely set. He wore a tennis-shirt, and round his waist a purple kamma-bund.

By his side the girl, Edie Copping, had begun to cry. "Oh, Elge," she said, "I do hate storms. They do make me feel rotten."

Early that morning Edie and her sister Ruth, and Alge and Alge's cronies, Bert and Jim, had started out with Mr. Meggeson the curate and a score or more of others for the woods. It was the annual summer outing of St. Saviour's "Social and Endeavour," and they had come by motor char-à-banc. After a noisy lunch of lemonade and sandwiches procured at the hut beside the lake, Mr. Meggeson had given word to scatter.

PICNIC

Edie and Alge had wandered far. From where they rested on their heather-scented couch they could no longer hear the shouts of their companions. Somewhere behind their heads a drowsy bee had buzzed. The afternoon had lapped them in its lazy warmth, and in the serving of those golden moments they had lost count of time. Only the sudden ominous darkening of the sky had roused them from their dream.

About them, in the little fern-floored glade, were visible the accessories and souvenirs of dalliance. Under a bush Alge could make out the empty bottles and the crumpled paper bag which he had thrown away an hour or more ago. Nearer, some cigarette ends and a heap of orange peel still marked the spot where they had sat and smoked and squeezed before retreating to the deeper shadows of the thicket's edge. Over there the yielding bracken still retained the impress of their bodies, and, resting side by side between the twisted ankles of an oak, there lay like scandalous stage properties his silver-mounted cane and Edie's powder-box and puff.

He strode forward to pick them up and as he did so came a second flash and then once more that curious susurrations of the upper air. "Eight seconds," he pronounced, proceeding towards the oak-tree after his pause to count. "It's still a long way off. It mayn't come here at all."

As if to answer him the fronting silhouette of trees leaped forwards, stamped its instantaneous pattern on the ground, and then as suddenly retreated. Next

PICNIC

moment thunder grumbled sourly round a distant ring of hills.

"Oo, Elge, it's getting nearer. It is."

He had returned from the oak-tree and held out her powder-box and puff.

"Here, catch hold," he said. "Better get along out of this. Better get yourself tidy too. Come on."

Together, then, they hurried from the glade, whilst high above their heads the wrath of heaven gathered. She would have run, but he, with a restraining hand upon her arm, prevented her. About them little dusty flocks of fallen leaves fled scampering in a hollow wind, and all around the boughs and stems of trees were labouring.

Edie still cried. Her head and throat were burning and her body shook with intermittent sobs. Alge could feel the trembling of her fingers on his coat-sleeve, but held his glance averted.

Suddenly she stopped and spoke. "I'm frightened. Oh, I feel so frightened."

They faced each other. The rushing wind had dropped, and in the hush that followed it were audible the last low pipings of the birds, held to a single faint, half-stifled note of fear. Presently these sounds also died away and all the forest waited breathless for the coming storm.

"We're all right, Edie. It's under single trees that's dangerous."

"It isn't only that. Oh, Elgie, it isn't only that I mean. You know . . ."

She faltered, paused a moment, and continued:

PICNIC

"You know, you promised, Elge. You promised to stick by me."

He regarded her uneasily. Clearing his throat he made as if to speak, then checked a half-embarrassed snigger. Into his glance there crept a look of troubled calculation, presently of apprehension.

The girl was clinging to him now with both hands round his neck. Above them, heavy with the imminence of rain, the sky had beetled like a frowning face.

"Oh, shut it, Edie. Everything's all right. I promise you it is. Let go my neck."

He tried to unloose her hands.

"Let go," he said. . . .

A sudden passion of resentment blazed between them. The tense, electric air had held their nerves astretch, but now pent-up emotion had its way. They railed like angry children, scarce knowing what they said.

"That's right, Elge; that's the way with fellows. Get round a girl and lead her into wrong and then 'Let go' they say."

"My God, you girls!"

"You know you planned it all along. That's why you was so glad when Mr. Meggeson says 'Break.' That's why——"

"And so was you, you tart! You wanted it as bad as me, you know you did. Let go my neck, I say."

She released her grasp so suddenly that he reeled backwards, catching at a branch. The girl had sunk upon her knees, hysterically sobbing.

Alge ran his fingers tenderly around his neck.

PICNIC

"Come on," he muttered sulkily. "It's going to pelt. I'm going to the hut. The others'll be there by this and wondering where we've got to. Come along, Edie."

"You cad!" she said.

He eyed her nervously. His face was white. "I'm going," he repeated, but she made no move.

"All right," he said. "I'm off. Not going to wait here to get soaked an' struck. Let you get on with it."

She raised her eyes.

"You cad!" she said again.

"I'm not. Why don't you come?"

"Along of you? I wouldn't be seen dead!"

"You fool! It's your fault just as much as mine."

"It wasn't."

"Yes, it was. You——"

He stopped that moment, for a sudden, searing flash that seemed to rive the sky blinded their eyes and drove recrimination back upon their lips. Next instant, with a deafening report, the storm had broken on them in its fury.

They ran then, plunging through brake and thicket, stumbling down paths grown darker every moment. The rain came on just as they reached a little clearing and by the time they crossed it they were drenched.

They made, so far as memory might guide them, for the refreshment hut where they had bought their lemonade and sandwiches three hours ago. At intervals Alge uttered a forlorn halloo.

After a time the downpour became less torrential, but overhead the mighty din went on without a

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pause. The lightning now was almost continuous. It gave them curious momentary visions of a whelmed and stricken world—the drenched and spouting leaves, the shining trunks of trees, long, streaming vistas that fled headlong through a glittering sea of ink, drowned paths that slid away to regions more tormented yet.

Alge felt the touch of Edie's hand upon his shoulder. She shouted in his ear: "I can't run any more." Next instant she had sunk exhausted at his feet.

He tried in vain to raise her. She seemed too tired and too terrified to move. Her arms were scratched and bleeding and her flimsy summer clothes were torn. She drew his head down to her lips and whispered: "We're going to get struck. It serves us right. We're going to get struck."

Between the flashes it was dark, but not too dark for him to see her face. Something in its expression puzzled and dismayed him. Her eyes were large and feverishly bright. Her mouth was set to a straight line. She lay inert and terrified, and yet in the abandon of her pose was something curiously more than terror or despair. In some obscure and contradictory fashion it conveyed a hint of triumph.

He raised himself and frowned. For a moment he puckered his lips as to a hesitating whistle. His jaw dropped and his gaze grew plaintive.

II

Perhaps an hour had passed. For more than half that time Edie had remained as she had fallen, resist-

PICNIC

ing every effort on the part of Alge to move her. At last, however, a flash more blinding than the rest had caused her to scramble to her feet. They had run then, clumsily, for their limbs were chilled and cramped, through tangles of drenched undergrowth, along the slippery and sodden paths.

Now for a while they halted to take breath.

"It's hardly raining," said Alge presently. "I knew it wouldn't last. Come along, kiddo, let's do a scamper to the hut an' then you'll be O.K."

Suddenly she laughed, and the smile which he had forced to reassure her faded as suddenly.

"The hut!" she said. "You don't know where it is no more than me. We won't get there. It's going to get us first. The lightning. We're going to get struck."

They were almost the first words she had spoken since her collapse an hour ago. Her voice was toneless, but her eyes were wild. And once again he seemed to catch that curious and brooding note of triumph.

"Get struck!" he echoed, in a pale derision. "Don't talk so silly! Why, the rain's almost stopped and so's the lightning——"

He paused there, for to belie his words there came a distant, surly roar. The storm, which for a time had seemed to pass behind them in a circle, was now returning.

"It's coming back," she said. "There, see that flash!"

"Look here," said Alge, "what's come to you?"

PICNIC

If you're afraid why don't you get a move on? Come on, old Edie girl, no nonsense."

He ended lamely. His attempt at mastery had failed. He stood confronting her in the soaked twilight of the forest. Before her glance his own fell cowed and baffled.

"It's coming back," she said again. "The lightning!"

Her voice, which had been toneless, held now an almost gloating quality.

He raised his eyes to hers. Upon her face, tight-lipped and tranced, there sat an unreal exaltation, a sort of dreadful and exultant acquiescence in fatality.

"Oh, God, shut up," he said. "You and your bloody lightning!"

His words had ended on a nervous shout, for at that instant came another flash much nearer than the last.

"Come on," he said. "I'm going to run. Almost on top of us that one, it was."

He started off. The girl, after a moment's hesitation, followed him, but made no attempt to hurry.

"Come on," he shouted back at her again. "For heaven's sake, come on."

He waited until she had come up with him. His face worked nervously. His lips were dry.

"Why can't you run?" he said. "You say the lightning's going to strike you. . . . I believe you want it to. Gone lousy, that you have. . . ."

The perspiration broke upon his forehead. He seized her arm and tried to drag her by main force. "Look here," he screamed, "you got to come, or

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else I'm going on alone . . . Edie. . . . Do you hear?"

They proceeded slowly in this fashion, whilst he, with one hand clenched about her wrist, cajoled, expostulated, and entreated, striving in vain to hurry her.

"I'll marry you . . . to-morrow, that I will . . . do anything you like. . . . You hear? I'll marry you. . . ."

Any answer she might have given him was lost in a terrific peal of thunder. She started then to run with him. At last, and with the nearer threat of danger, that tranced and stony mood of hers had crumbled for the time.

They hastened down the sodden paths. Alge reasoned that sooner or later they must strike the road by which they had approached the forest. Once they hit that, the rest was simple.

III

It was as the trees began to thin around the edges of a clearing that Edie said: "Listen! I thought I heard somebody shout."

They stopped, straining their ears, but could hear nothing save the surly mutter of the thunder.

"It isn't anyone," said Alge. "They're all inside the hut by now. Let's get across this bit. I think I see a road."

They hurried forward, gazing with eager eyes towards the spot at which his finger pointed.

PICNIC

"Make haste," he called

He had said that, and she, somehow, had run a little way before him through the fringing belt of trees. He heard her shout: "Look, here's the quickest way," and saw her pass from out the shadows of the wood and gain the centre of the clearing.

Then she looked up, and, following hard behind her at a distance of ten yards, he saw her face.

He heard her cry: "Oh, Elge, the sky, the sky!"

A second later he was at her side and looked up too.

Above their heads, so close that one might touch it with an upraised hand, so curiously, fearfully remote that Edie's cry climbed tingling thinly and more thinly in its infinite ascent, the sky hung stretched and level as a painted card. Then, as Alge gazed, the card began to crumple slowly. An angry, brownish light shone round the circle of the hills.

He was as surely and as instantly aware of threatened danger as if he watched the steady creeping of a flame along a fuse. Some instinct threw him flat upon his face. "Get lower, quick! Get down!" he shouted to the girl.

Next moment there came such a shattering shock as seemed to rend the earth. Although their eyes were shut they felt a blinding light as though all heaven had spouted into flame. And almost instantly a curious, deathly reek had filled their nostrils.

After some seconds Alge sat up.

From the woods on the farther side of the clearing towards which they had been running came a voice.

PICNIC

"Gor love us, that was a wunner. Something went west then in a hurry. Look, can't you see it? Over in the trees there. I can see the smoke. . . ."

The voice was lost awhile, but presently it shouted: "Look, there's a bloke upon the ground. Why, blimey if it ain't young Elge. Look, an' there's Edie too."

Alge had risen to his feet by the time his friends came up. Three of them, Bert and Jim and little Freda Bighouse, all very haggard and bedraggled, all chattering in a nervous rush of talk.

"We lost our way. Reckoned we was the only ones, we did, an' all the others snug inside." "That wasn't arf a stunner, was it?" "Blew off ole Jimbo's 'at." "Where is the bally 'ut then anyway?" . . .

Presently there was a pause and then somebody said:

"Ullo, what's up with Edie—can't she speak?"

She was standing, very pale, and looking at the opening in the wood from which they had come out into the clearing. Just there the trees stood straight and calm against the sky, but from behind their screening forms, as from a hidden wound, there travelled faintly to them still that curious, pungent reek.

"Poor kid," said Bert, "she's properly done in. Never mind, Edie girl, you'll be O.K. along of us."

"She's starin' at that place I saw the smoke," said Jim. "Don't she look queer? Tell us, what is it, Edie?"

She turned, white-faced, and spoke.

PICNIC

"Elge," she said slowly, "Elge, that was the place where we was waiting. Elge, it was meant for you and me."

There was a pause and presently an awkward laugh. Then Alge said nervously:

"It's the storm that's made her queer. Just like a blessed jug of milk she is."

"Well, come along an' don't stand gassin' 'ere," said Bert. "It isn't over yet."

Quite unexpectedly they came upon the road. Jim, with a shout of triumph, leaped across the broken fence that marked the ragged limit of the wood. "And look," he said, "why, there's the 'ut. What price a cup o' tea?"

They pushed on jubilantly. Alge and Jim had drawn a little way ahead. Behind them Bert was walking with the tired girls.

As they neared the hut Alge caught the sound of Edie's voice: "He's going to marry me."

The words were plain. Jim could not have ignored them had he wished.

"Ullo," he said, "what's this I 'ear? You an' young Edie, eh? Shake 'ands, ole man!"

The two of them turned back to join the rest.

"Well, I'll be 'anged," said Bert, "some folks 'as funny ways. To go an' pop it in a blinkin' thunder-storm!"

"Ah," giggled Freda in a nervous titter of excitement, "I expect it was the storm as give 'im courage. The electricity an' that, you know."

"Well, any'ow cheer up, you two," said Bert

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sarcastically. "It isn't arf as bad as goin' to a funeral."

A minute's further walking brought them to the hut. Just as they gained its shelter the storm broke out afresh.

IV

The long, low wooden room was crammed with people. A dozen picnic parties, driven for refuge from all parts of the wood, filled it to overflowing. The air was blue with smoke and heavy with the steam that rose from soaking clothes.

"Ough! What a fug!" said Jim. "I don't see any of our joint."

But presently, by dint of dogged shoving, they discovered their own party, miserably packed and steaming like the rest.

"Ullo," said Bert, "thought we was struck now, didn't you? An' so did we a little while ago."

A dozen leaden-eyed and pallid faces stared back at him lethargically, too woebegone to smile. Five or six damp and tired girls were sitting in stolid and resigned discomfort on a form. Their drenched finery hung soaking round their bodies like the petals of so many dashed and muddled flowers. Wedged in a silent, surly knot beside a window, their swains stood smoking gloomily.

"Well, ain't you glad to see us then?" demanded Bert facetiously. "We'd 'a' called earlier, but was detained over our toy-letts."

PICNIC

"Pity there ain't a mirror," replied someone sourly, "and then you'd see yourselves."

"Better than sittin' in a row with faces like the backs of trams, at any rate," said Bert ungallantly.

"Ere, what about a cup o' tea?"

"You've got some 'opes. The tea's all gorn. There's only bath water."

Outside the rain descended in a vicious fury. A stretch of gravel round the hut was covered with a sudden white and seething carpet where the drops had stung the ground and risen ankle-high like steam. A lamp was lit. It shed a flickering and uncertain light so that each countenance appeared decayed, swimming within a sallow watery unreality, like sick men's faces pictured in a dream.

Suddenly Edie cried: "Where's Ruth?"

There was a moment's pause, then someone said:

"She hasn't come in yet."

"Who saw her last?" Her voice rang out high pitched, tremulous with alarm. "Who was she with, I say?"

"No need to worry, Edie. She's all right. She went with Mr. Meggeson. He'll see to 'er all right."

"With Mr. Meggeson!"

"Yes. They was together any'ow the last I see of 'em. Lord love us, child, there's nothing to take on about. Whatever's happened to the girl!"

"It's the storm," said Alge sulkily. "It's given her a headache."

"Too much excitement," remarked Bert with a

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meaning intonation. "Which reminds me, you 'aven't 'eard the news."

"The news! What news?"

"They've fixed it up together," he proclaimed. "'Er an' young Elge."

There was a moment's incredulous silence. Somebody began to whistle "'Snaughty but 'Snice." Then a girl tittered: "That's why she's let 'er 'air down. 'Opportunity's a fine thing, 'Eddie."

"Puss, puss!" called Freda. "Give the chee-ild a chance. Can't you congratulate 'er?"

Alge stood confused. An angry flush had risen to his cheek. His fingers fidgeted about the lapel of his coat.

"Looks like a cat that's swallowed a canary, I don't think."

"More like an 'am bone that's gone an' lost its frill! 'Ere, Elge, boy, give us a shake!"

After the handshaking and congratulations Alge slunk away. He edged between the shoulders of the crowd until he reached the strip of varnished wood that had served as counter while there was anything to sell. He looked up and by his side saw Bert.

"No luck," said Alge. "Not even a cake."

"Never mind the cakes," said Bert. "You goin' to marry Edie?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"You better . . ."

"I'd better! What d'you mean?"

He could make out Edie standing with the group beside the window. Her face was half averted, but he could fancy she was crying. Her hair hung down

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her back, but neatly now. Somebody, apparently, had lent her a slide. His gaze flickered, became furtive, then rebellious.

"What's it got to do with you?" he said.

Bert for a time stood silent. The rain had ceased. The lamp had been extinguished. The mutter of the thunder grew more distant. Somewhere a voice, sardonically festive, began to sing "Ain't we got Fun?"

"To do with me?" repeated Bert. "To do——"

He stopped there suddenly. Alge followed the direction of his glance. "Hello," he said, "here's Ruth and Mr. Meggeson."

They had come in, soaking and dishevelled, from the storm. The curate's hat was gone, his grey alpaca coat was daubed with mud. His teeth chattered. His eyes were set in a peculiar, glassy stare. Just for a moment the thought had flashed across the mind of Alge: "Good Lord, he's drunk."

But Mr. Meggeson was not drunk, only very frightened. He had discovered them by this time, and made his way, still shivering, to where they stood. "She's hurt herself," he stammered. "That last stroke. A branch fell on her arm."

The girl beside him forced a flickering smile. "It isn't anything," she said. "Only a scratch. Mr. Meggeson did it up for me——"

"After a fashion," said Mr. Meggeson. "Only after a fashion. It ought to be attended to" His face was grey, peculiarly lined, and creased like crumpled paper.

PICNIC

Alge raised his voice. "Edie," he called, "here's Ruth."

But Edie was already at their side. She undid the handkerchief which Mr. Meggeson had tied around her sister's arm.

"It was the branch," said Ruth in a faint whisper. "A tree was struck. It might have killed us. That last stroke . . ."

"I know," said Edie. "It nearly got us too. Anyone got some rag?"

Her voice was harsh and strained. Without raising her eyes to look at him, she returned his handkerchief to Mr. Meggeson.

"Some rag!" said Freda. "You're welcome to my petticoat!"

The injured arm was bound.

Outside the storm had ended. A watery evening sun showed sheepishly behind the trees. People began to scatter from the hut.

"Hi, Ruthie, 'ave you 'eard the news?" said Jim. "Your sister's gone an' fixed it with young Elge."

But Ruthie's only answer was a nervous smile.

The char-à-banc had come out from the garage. St. Saviour's Social and Endeavour clambered to its seats. Slowly at first, then with a gathering roar that merged the catcalls and the shouting in a general steady and incessant din, they started on their way.

For many a noisy mile they thundered on towards Hoxton.

PICNIC

Eddie was sitting between Alge and Mr. Meggeson. Until they left the Lea Bridge Road to skirt the southern side of Clapton Common she had kept silence. Now, as the racing lights of shops and lamps began to twinkle on each shouting mouth and waving arm, she turned at last towards the curate and in a voice directed so that only he could hear, inquired:

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Do about what?" he stammered. For a while he did not catch her meaning, but as he marked the small, set face beside him, still tranced and curiously passionless as that of one who walks in sleep, a terrible misgiving filled his own.

"About my sister here, about young Ruth. . . . The lightning tried to get us, Elge and me. It tried to get you too . . ."

His jaw had dropped. A stealthy sweat began to break upon his forehead. A look of horror crept into his eyes.

"She told you then," he whispered. "I—I'm going to marry her."

It was a second or two later that someone in the seat behind them shouted:

"Hi, wake up there in front. Budge up, young Elge, an' give 'er room. Your gel's a-goin' to faint!"

NIGHTMARE JACK

I

It's curious how things are forgotten on the river. Has it ever struck you? People live and die upon its banks, ships come and go upon its muddy waters, and of them all hardly the names survive the morrow. Love and crime, despair and death, make the city with every flood and pass out with every ebb, but they scarcely leave a ripple on the secret river; it flows on and forgets them all.

A bare ten years have slipped by since Nightmare Jack was last seen about the docks, yet I would lay you long odds that, save for his deformity, he might walk to-day from Poplar to the Isle of Dogs and pass unrecognised. Even he, whom we thought unforgettable, the little, hare-lipped man with the hoarse voice of clutching terror, victim of that strange, incessant dream.

It is as well that he cannot come back. He dreams no longer. We who gave him to the keeping of the river can sleep the sounder knowing that the brown waters hold him fast. . . .

I shall give you the story as at last he told it to us those ten years back in the upper room of the little, black inn at Shale, whilst the sweat broke and glistened on his face and the horror gathered in his eyes.

The four of us had dropped down in Cohen's boat with the ebbing tide and made Roaring Middle by early afternoon. All day long the river had shone in a hard, dull light like a great, brown muscle, but as

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we turned out of the stream and crept up the creek and alongside the tiny stone causeway back of the deserted inn the sky began to darken, and a wind stirred the surface of the water into little, choppy waves.

We made fast the boat and stepped ashore, and I gave the three low raps upon the door that Jack, and Jack's Eliza, understood. As we waited I looked at my three companions, and saw that over two of them as over me there hung the shadow of that black business we had afoot.

There were Crabbe, Cohen, myself, and that other—Gilchrist. Heaven knows why he was there, that shameful, silent man with his white, pasty cheeks and his dull, averted eyes! Even to his face we had called him "Dead Fish," and he had never raised a hand to strike or given us the lie. Yet he was safe enough, we thought, and had the uses of all evil things. . . .

No answer came to my knocking, so, having tried in vain to turn the handle, we climbed in through a low window which had been left half-closed, and then marched upstairs, Cohen leading. He threw open the door of the room we knew for Jack's, entered, and signed to us to follow. We filed in, bending our heads under the low doorway. Gilchrist, who was the last, turned the key.

Never have I seen a man more sick than he who lay half dressed upon the bed. The scanty hair lay dank upon his forehead, and the face was gone a dead grey colour like the belly of a slug. One look at him was enough to tell us that we had been anticipated in our errand. He could hardly last more than a few hours

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at the longest. Only in his little, wicked eyes did the old, evil light yet creep and flicker, and the succulent sin seem still to well and ooze.

He turned his head to the door as it closed behind us, and when his gaze rested upon Gilchrist he managed to raise his voice in a hoarse whisper and a slow and dwelling rage.

"You!" he said. "You beeg, white scum. Why have you come? You of all men, you Nurse, you mothers' plague, you man-stealer!"

The venomous words did not sting Gilchrist to retort, but the blood mounted sluggishly about his neck and ears, and a dull hate smouldered in his eyes.

Suddenly, as he was turning inwards from the locked door, he uttered a cry of fear, and raised an arm to protect his face from something which, at a motion of Jack's elbow, leapt at him from the bed-end like a flying, furry shadow. When he put down his hand we saw the crimson drops starting from a long scratch across one cheek. Below him a great, neuter cat rubbed, purring noisily, against his shins.

Crabbe laughed grimly. "Pongo has learnt that trick well," he said, "and after all we could hardly expect a better welcome."

The man on the bed stirred and cleared his throat.

"Leesten," he said, in that curious, lisping, almost cultured voice of his in which the occasional French accent sorted so strangely with the foul idiom of the river, "Leesten, you coves! You needn't tell me why you've come, but you're too late—too late. The las' trip's been run. I been expectin' you, though,

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ever since Eliza leave me two days back. She knew Rory'd tol' you where I was. She was afraid and ran. Two days I been lyin' 'ere, sirs, waitin' for the scrape o' your boat against the stage an' the soun' o' your boots upon the stairs. And in me dreams——"

"Curse your dreams!" snarled Cohen. "You've them to thank for our visit. The man who dreams aloud about us and our concerns must sleep where he won't be heard. . . ."

The little, stretched-out man looked up at him, and his shoulders began to shake in a wheezy, mirthless laugh that set the nerves acrawl. "Four o' you," he chuckled, "four o' you, be gosh, to put a dyin' man to 'is sleep. Why, gents, I take it as a ruddy honour, I do an' all, he-he!"

There was something extraordinarily shocking in his merriment at such a time, and that he should be so game was going to make our business none the easier. Yet it was not all bravery on his part. His eyes were bright with the fear of something from which he might welcome even death itself as an escape.

"Say, Mr. Morgan, sir," said he to me after a pause, "seet down one moment, and let me tell you what I 'ave to tell. It won't take long. I'd take it as a favour. Seems like I must get it off me chest. You'll think less 'ard o' Nightmare Jack per'aps, when once you've 'aird. What's the time now?"

I told him it was half-past three.

"Gimme till four, gents," he whispered thickly. "'Alf an hour like good blokes."

I looked at the others, Cohen and Crabbe, and then,

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hesitating and half ashamed, nodded to Nightmare Jack. Was there, I wondered, some ruse behind the urgency of this request, or was it merely a pathetic staving-off of doom, perhaps an attempt to raise our pity? Anyhow, we had him safe and sure, and the man might well be dead by four o'clock. It would save trouble.

So, whilst the uneasy wind without began to question and to rattle at the panes, Nightmare Jack narrated, brokenly and painfully, with a sob of terror often rising in his throat and catching at his breath, the story, vain and tumultuous, of the Pointing Hand.

At times, and under strong emotion, the whispering voice would tend again towards the *lingua franca* of Quebec; yet in the main held steady to the slightly tintured English which is all that I can try to reproduce.

We had taken chairs near the door, but in the grip of what we heard the three of us drew closer and closer to the bed. Only Gilchrist remained seated in a darkening corner, nursing with a handkerchief his wounded cheek.

On a pillow and close to the head of Nightmare Jack, Pongo, the huge cat that I had given him, slowly preened itself and purred.

II

"Eight year ago to-day, near as may be, three men sailed out o' Rangoon with jewels fit for 'eaven in their 'ands and the fear of 'ell in their 'earts.

"All the way from Sinbo, far up country, they'd

NIGHTMARE JACK

come, and on the journey down to the ship things 'ad not gone well with them. Leetle 'itches, more or less, that might 'ave been explained easily enough if their nerves 'adn't been on edge with knowin' what they carried an' 'ow they'd come by it.

"T'ree times or four they'd given that shinin', sinful stuff its last look afore chuckin' it into the river, an' t'ree times they'd changed their minds an' 'urried on again.

"But when once they'd got it an' themselves aboard an' couldn' see that funny, one-eyed fellow who'd followed them down from Mandalay no more their minds were easier, an' they spends all their time plannin' what they was goin' to do with the money they would make when they got 'ome.

"Only ole Fatty Simpson began to lie awake in his bunk at night rememberin' all o' them leetle things that 'ad 'appen on the journey down, an' in the mornin' 'e would say to them other two, Cutler an' Langrish, 'Thinks I'll chuck me 'and in, mates, an' if you takes my advice you'll 'eave the lot over the side, stones an' all. I tells you I know what rubies ought to look like, but these are just the colour o' stale blood. Leastways, they are now. I tell you, they're *rum 'uns*. Anyway, you can 'ave my share o' the pizenous stuff, an' much good may it do you.'

"But some'ow 'e never told them what partly explained 'is nervousness—that in lookin' over into the well deck for'ard 'e'd spotted that berry-brown, one-eyed cove tailin' on to a rope with a bunch o' lascars, an' so Langrish an' Cutler only laughs at 'is fidgets—else I would never, a' come into the story later on. . . .

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"When they reach London there were seven others waitin' for them to share out the pretties. Ten of 'em all told there was, an' Dr. Gill the 'ead o' the crowd. It was 'e an' Mr. Cuthbert an' Langrish 'ad got wind o' the stuff first of all in some old temple up Mogaung way an' formed what they called a Syndicate to get it. They'd drawn lots to fix who should go for it, an' Langrish 'e always swore that the t'ree red balls 'e 'an 'is mates pulled from the box 'ad been doctored some'ow by Gill an' the rest.

"But they thought no more o' that once they was 'ome, an' when they met to talk things over in the little doss-'ouse out at Rother'ithe they all toasted themselves and their great 'Luck' till they was too tipsy to stand. Even Fatty 'ad got over 'is fright an' took back what 'e'd said about givin' up 'is claim.

"All the same, when 'e an' a couple more were rowin' down stream after the meetin' to Jellicoe's Wharf, 'e notice another boat edgin' after them in the shadow of the bank, an' though 'e couldn' see the face o' the fellow that pulled at the oars, 'is back reminded 'im again of that squint-faced chap as 'ad come across with them in the fo'c's'le of the *Burmah Queen*.

"It 'ad been agreed after a good deal o' talkin' and quarrellin' that the stones themselves should be divided out, an' then that each man should sell 'is lot as 'e liked, provided 'e did it slow an' careful. Ah, you know, even then there was a reason for this way of arrangin' things that none of 'em liked to own to. They wanted,

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some'ow, to get right clear away from what they'd done so they'd never 'ave to see each other again and be reminded. . . . The rubies, since they'd come aboard at Rangoon, 'ad be'aved well enough for the matter o' that, but Fatty Simpson 'ad got talkin'—an' you know what being frighten' is—it spreads, spreads . . . !"

Suddenly Nightmare Jack set up a wild, high, echoing laugh, and the cat for a moment stopped its purring and its preening to lick his hand. Cohen had started forward with an exclamation, but Crabbe pushed him back. "It's all right," he said. "That's how it always takes him, when he has his dreams. . . ."

Presently the laughing ceased abruptly, and the hoarse and stealthy voice went on:

"For three years or more those ten men lived 'idden from each other. They was all round about London as it chance, but for all the times they ever met after the share-out they might 'ave been thousands of miles apart. The stones went very, very slowly, an' each man 'ad 'ardly got rid of a quarter of 'is lot when the things began to 'appen. . . ."

"It wasn't with Fatty Simpson that they started altogether, but it was from 'im I 'eard it first, sirs, an' I'll tell you 'ow it was.

"Fatty 'ad bought 'imself an 'ouse down the river near Grays, an' 'ad come to the end of his first three stones, so one day 'e come up to London to try an' sell the fourth.

"In the train, about half a dozen stations before Fenchurch Street, 'e begin to dream. . . ."

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"Of course I know of what 'e dream. It's always the same dream. Never to this day do I or any of the others tell a 'uman soul about those dreams. Not that I 'aven't been asked often enough. But it would 'ave done no good. . . . What would people 'ave said if I 'ad tell them of the thing that follow me night and day, the thing that flash before me now the moment I close my eyes, this long, brown, lower arm of a man, with the 'and stiffen from the wrist, an' the fingers pointin', always pointin'!

"It was that that Fatty saw out of the carriage window as 'e looked north over Stratford marsh, an' 'e open 'is bag in a 'urry, an' take a quick pull at the flask 'e 'ad inside. That stiffen 'im up a lot, an' when 'e look out again 'e couldn' see what 'e seen afore. Presently the train ran into Fenchurch Street, an' 'e got out an' made for the nearest bar. 'E swallowed a few smart ones to complete the cure, an' by the time 'e set off east an' towards the river with the ruby in a wallet in 'is pocket 'e was laughin' to 'imself about 'is funny dream. Yet even then somethin' cold at the bottom of 'is 'eart seemed to tell 'im that 'is laughin' days were over an' the game was up.

"The ruby 'e'd brought with 'im, sirs, was a rare big one, with two circles cut on it, one inside the other, an' the fence 'e was sellin' it to looked at 'im a bit curious as 'e turned it over in 'is little room upstairs.

"'Funny,' 'e says. 'A bloke was in 'air 'bout six months ago with a ruby just like this—cut in the same way. I couldn' give 'im much for it either because o' that. Marked stones are too dam' risky.'

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“‘E went on lookin’, first at the pretty an’ then at Fatty, till presently ‘e says:

“‘By the way, boss, you don’t ‘appen to ‘ave bin in ‘air before wi’ that other ruby, eh?”

“‘What?’ says Fatty. ‘I bin in ‘air before? Not I, nor I won’t ever come in again neither if you ‘ands me out any more o’ that macaroni. What yer mean?”

“‘Well now, that’s quair,’ said the fence. ‘It’s true you didn’t remind me of ‘im at first, but what with ‘avin’ the same kind o’ stone, an’ the same funny mark on yer cheek, it did look a bit odd.’

“‘Mark on me cheek!’ said ole Fatty. ‘By gum! I’ll make you a present of it!’ An’ ‘e did too, leavin’ a bruise the size of ‘is fist on the other fellow’s face. Then ‘e put the ruby back into its wallet an’ walked out of the shop.

“‘Bein’ so full o’ whisky as ‘e was, ‘e didn’t think much more o’ what the fence ‘ad said beyond ‘is bein’ anxious to get quit o’ the stone, till ‘e ‘appened to drop into a barber’s, an’ the man ‘oo shaved ‘im said the same thing about ‘is face.

“‘Where?’ asked Fatty, lookin’ in the mirror, ‘I can’t see no mark on me cheek. What’s it like?’

“‘The man told ‘im it was a leetle, lop-sided patch of yellow, like a stain or a burn, just under the bone on the left side.

“‘Oh, yes,’ said Fatty, pretendin’ to see it. ‘That’s acid. I spilt some there this mornin’, but I didn’t notice it ‘ad made a stain.’

“‘The same afternoon three other people told ‘im about ‘is cheek, yet when ‘e got ‘ome an’ looked in the

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glass 'e could see nothin'. 'E didn't sleep one wink that night, but it was only by the early mornin' of the next day that 'e began to catch the meanin' of what 'ad come to 'im.

"Then 'e began to sweat with terror, same as I've sweated now for many a long year, an' two days after that the dreams came on again. . . ."

Nightmare Jack stopped, and, though his lips continued to move, it was only after some seconds that I caught the words they uttered. "Brandy," he whispered. "There's a bottle in the cupboard."

He took a long, difficult drink from the half-pannikin I poured out for him, and after a little while continued.

"It was one day in the nex' week, Fatty tell me, that, as 'e was walkin' along the road towards Tilbury, 'e ran against Cutler—one of the three to bring the jewels 'ome from Burmah.

"Cutler didn' seem as surprise' to meet 'im as 'e might 'ave been some'ow, an' for a minute or two 'e was talkin' about 'is aunt's 'ealth, an' the bad drains, an' the marrows 'e was growin' at 'ome. 'E was lookin' downright seedy, an' presen'ly, when 'e turned 'is face round from the way 'e'd been 'oldin' it all that time, Fatty saw a great patch of plaster on 'is left cheek-bone.

"Then, of course, 'e knew, an' the two o' them compare notes. . . ."

"It turned out that what 'ad 'appen to Fatty, 'ad come to Cutler months before, an' seemin'ly, to most o' the others too. Leetle by leetle, as 'is dreams got

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worse an' the terror grew, each of the gang 'ad made up 'is mind to cast about an' find the rest, so that by the time Cutler came upon Fatty on the Tilbury road there was only three of the ten the others couldn' trace.

"Nex' day, sirs, Cutler took Fatty to meet the rest at the same old doss-'ouse down at Rother'ithe. When they got there they found that two o' the missin' three 'ad jus' been found' an' brought in by Dr. Gill, so there was only one they couldn' track, an' 'e might well be dead. Of the nine fellows that sat shiverin' an' cursin' roun' their liquor in that leetle room upstairs every man-jack carried a face the colour o' bad dough, an' every sweatin' mother's-son 'ad grown as much 'air on 'is cheeks as 'e could raise, except Fatty, 'oo 'adn' thought of it, an' Cutler, 'oose whiskers 'ad come out white an' didn' 'ide the stain.

"They were all in such a stew about what 'ad come to them an' what might 'appen nex' that it 'ardly took more than a bad five minutes an' a couple o' pints o' good brandy to make up their minds to a plan. 'Does anyone know a likely man to skipper us out to Burmah with what's left o' the stones, an' to 'old 'is tongue when we're back again?' ask Dr. Gill. 'I take it we're all goin', else those 'oo stop be'ind'll suspect the others.'

"'Yes,' said Fatty. 'I do. If you like I can sound 'im this very afternoon, knowin' 'im to be ashore till Sunday.'

"There was a leetle discussion then about whether they couldn' take out a ship themselves, an' 'ow they

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was to restore the stones an' account for those they'd sold already, an' what they could do about the missin' man, but the upshot of it all was that within a quarter of an hour Fatty was walkin' out an' down the street to get 'old o' that chap 'e'd tell of.

"Now, it so 'appen that almost as soon as Fatty 'ad gone out of the room some o' the others suddenly thought o' somethin' important that mus' be told 'im before 'e spoke to me—for of course, as you've guessed, gents, it was me Fatty 'ad in 'is mind—an' so Dr. Gill sent a fellow called Toby Charteris 'urryin' out after Fatty to try an' catch 'im up with a message before 'e got to the docks where 'e was bound.

"The road which Charteris took was by way of bein' a short cut, an' as 'e was comin' down a narrow alley 'e saw Fatty passin' at a great pace across the end of it along the river-side. 'E saw too that Fatty 'ad seen 'im, for 'e turn 'is 'ead jus' at that moment, but although Toby waved to 'im 'e wouldn't stop, an' nex' minute was 'idden by a corner of the street.

"Charteris say afterwards, poor brute, that direc'ly 'e caught sight of Fatty scuttlin' along like that, 'e felt some'ow as though cold water was tricklin' down 'is back. There was somethin' quair about Fatty's look that 'e couldn' understan' an' didn' like, an' by the time 'e'd started into a run so as to reach the end of the alley an' get a clear view up the road that ran along the river 'e caught an' idea that made 'im like the look o' things still less. For it come to 'im suddenly that Fatty was *scared*—you see, *scared*—an' was hurryin' away from somebody or somethin'. . . .

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"'E 'ad 'alf a mind then to turn back, but 'e was at the corner o' the road by this, an' made out Fatty about two 'undred yards a'ead.

"'E 'adn' run more than a minute after Fatty before 'e saw 'im doin' a cur'us thing. 'E bent down quick, picked up a bit of paper from the gutter, wrote some-thin' on it against a post, an' left it under a stone dead in Toby's path.

"There was nobody else jus' then along the road, and Charteris was sure the paper was a message left for 'im.

"A second or two later 'e come up to it, picked it out from under the stone, an' ran 'is eye over the words upon it. This is what 'e saw:

"For God's sake don't look be'ind you!"

"There was a strong wind blowing out the ebb tide, an' in the fright of what 'e'd read 'e let the paper go. The breeze caught it, an' 'e made a silly grab to stop it. Then, while 'e was watchin' it carairin' down the road, an' while 'e 'ad 'is back turned to the way 'e 'ad been runnin', 'e saw what Fatty must 'ave seen, an' 'e fell down sittin' on 'is 'ams, same as a leetle dog might do, an' began to laugh.

"Upon 'im first of all the ten it 'ad come—the beeg, dirty 'Orror of 'is dreams, an' whilst 'is bones turn to rottenness inside 'im, an' 'is stomach crawl an' swim, 'e squatted an' scrabbled in the dust an' giggled like a girl.

"*Mon Dieu*, 'ow 'e laugh! 'E was laughin' still when 'e got back to the rest at Rother'ithe, an' they cuffed 'im an' kicked 'im an' stuffed a gag in

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'is mouth to make 'im stop, 'e was so 'orrible to 'ear.

"Then, all of a sudden, 'e quieted down, an', shiverin' in 'is fear, 'e told them 'ow, when 'e was lookin' after the scrap of paper blowin' in the wind, 'e saw the long, nut-coloured arm an' the pointin' 'and, an' be'ind it, right away in the distance, the *Face* belongin' to it, lookin' down the arm at 'im with its single eye like a man sightin' along the barrel of a rifle. . . . 'E said it was the look of the face that 'ad work the mischief in 'im. It was such a leetle, clean sort of dry, brown face with never a smile, an' it 'ung so far away, right over the river, lookin' through the masts an' funnels of the shippin'. It would 'ave been better, 'e said, if it 'ad been nearer an' bigger. . . . 'E began to whimper then, an' it was jus' when they were pumpin' stiff brandies into 'im one after the other that Fatty an' I came up the stairs an' into the room.

"Fatty, you see, 'ad escape what 'appen to Toby Charteris. After leavin' the doss-'ouse 'e 'ad chance to look be'ind 'im as 'e walked along the river-side, an' what 'e saw followin' 'im a long way back was not the pointin' 'and or the face, but jus' that one-eyed fellow that 'ad shadow 'im an' the other two all those years back as they dropped below Mandalay. . . . It was enough to scare 'im though, an' 'e felt that what 'ad come to Toby would 'ave come to 'im instead if 'e 'adn' turn 'is 'ead in time an' run. After leavin' the note under the stone 'e came straight on to me, an' mad as I thought 'im when 'e broach 'is business, I thought 'is chums a good deal madder when we pushed

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open the door an' found them sittin', swearin' an' 'iccuppin' in a circle with poor Charteris cryin' in the middle.

"They were all shoutin' somethin' that I couldn' rightly catch, but when I saw them pointin' at 'is face I got the 'ang of it. They were all callin' out an' sayin' that the yellow mark 'ad leave 'is cheek."

III

It was here that Nightmare Jack, in a curious extremity of horror, which for some moments I thought forced and insincere, spoke to us of those hidden things which he supposed to underlie the happenings he narrated.

He told us in a cowering breath of fear of the old, still temple near Mogaung, and of the foul God that tottered there upon its stool. Whilst the wind without raced up against the yellow tide and his face within went grey upon the pillow, that little, whispering man spoke to us—by his frantic hands and eyes as much as by his dying mouth—of the mythos of the Web and Loaf, and the faded terror of the Triple Scum.

I can still remember and record—though it is impossible to convey the slow and loathing horror with which he uttered them—the phrases he employed to make his meaning clear.

The God distributed himself amongst a "lousy crew" of priests or hierophants, who shared his power and desires and in a sense composed him. Once every year the ruddy-coloured stones that were his essence

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were taken from him, and two men selected who should sleep for seven nights with the rubies next their skin.

Then they would pass through the sick terms of a novitiate, would bear upon their cheeks the yellow stain, and finally would enter in upon the God and be added to the number of his priests.

Something else at which Nightmare Jack's tongue halted and his soul revolted, something confused and abominable which even his lips refused to utter, must to his mind have lain within the very nature of that cult, but I know he meant that what had come to Toby Charteris as he watched the scrap of paper whirling down the wind was but the sign and token of reception and approval by the God. . . .

I can hear to-day the laugh, shy, almost apologetic, yet still shaken with that stark and horrid fear, with which the man we four had come to kill went on to build up and complete the explanation of his tale. At times, through all his terror, he might seem to speak with a curious reasonableness and detachment. He wanted us, and especially me, I think, to appreciate his position in the matter. He needed somehow to justify his soul, and his eyes sought mine with an odd, pathetic hunger. . . . As he whispered on I turned to watch the race of muddy water down the river. The wind was risen higher, and the windows drummed like blood against the brain.

He said that the rubies had been stolen just about the time when they should have been removed to make new priests. Fatty had been used to sleep with them

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in the wallet under his pillow on the journey back. Whether in doing so he hadn't absorbed all the power there was in them Nightmare Jack didn't know, but anyhow there was enough devil left in them to affect the rest. In the ordinary way the God's seed was replaced after it had "made men," and whatever juice was left was saved up to next year. He rather fancied that Toby Charteris used to keep his share of the jewels in a skin purse round his loins, and that was why the power worked so strong with him. It was something like vaccination, and "took" better with some than others.

He rather thought that the old God had been trying to "receive" one or other of them for a long time, but had been hindered and delayed by some technical flaw in the procedure. Ordinarily there would be a manifestation or materialisation in some human or semi-human form, and it was Nightmare Jack's idea that the one-eyed man from Mandalay was an imperfect attempt in this direction.

Then he went on to hint that those who had been once accepted by the God could themselves "make priests" and pass along the rottenness with a pointing hand. It was a thing that might spread like the pox till all the world was vile.

And here the man upon the bed began to cringe and huddle on himself. I had to bend my head to his to catch his words. It seemed that, now the evil had "got loose," and he had touched the rubies as he would tell us presently, he knew he too was wanted by the God. He repudiated the honour with dismay, for

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he didn't want to become a bloody priest, now *did he*, *did he?*

Outside the slowly darkening room, as Nightmare Jack resumed his tale, the wind still crept and drummed upon the panes.

IV

"Fatty an' 'is mates stayed talkin' in that room till after midnight, afraid to stir from the 'ouse, an' I, like a fool, stayed with them till the sight o' the crimson pebbles they showed me as proof o' their tale 'ad got burn into my eyes an', yellow patch be 'ang, I'd agree to skipper the precious outfit back to Burmah. As *you* know well enough, gents, I 'appen to be a fair judge o' stones, an' I was ready to sell my soul rather'n leave those beauties in the 'ands o' ravin' lunatics."

Nightmare Jack's eyes glistened, and for a moment he stopped whilst his fingers, long and delicate and brown, slid tip over tip as if caressing imaginary gems. His voice was growing slowly weaker, and it was with a painful effort that he took another drink from the pannikin and again took up his tale.

"Well, they mus' 'ave been pretty well mad ever to dream of settin' out to Burmah in a crowd like that, an I see plainly enough that I was goin' to 'ave 'ell's own trouble to find a ship an' crew an' then to clear 'er from port without suspicion, but I'd got a wad of Dr. Gill's bank notes warm against my 'eart with more to come,—an', besides, I'd seen the rubies. . . .

"After an 'eap o' worry an' delay I got a brig an'

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a crew to work 'er, not 'oldin' by smokestacks, which were new-fangled in those days.

"In the evenin' before the mornin' we were to sail a strange thing 'appen. Toby Charteris, 'oo'd been fit to die for the las' week or more, rushed past Dr. Gill when 'e unlocked 'is cabin to 'ave a look at 'im, tore up the companion on to the deck, an' ran shriekin' over the gangway on to the wharf. Two of the others followed quick to collar 'im, but 'e managed to slip them, an' it was near nightfall before 'e came back.

"Then 'e 'ad a quair tale to tell. 'E said that 'e'd been taken by a sort of frenzy, an' 'ad run wild, not knowin' where 'e went, till suddenly 'e woke up an' found 'imself standin' stiff an' straight an' pointin' at a man. It was somewhere in the docks quite near the ship, an' in the evenin' light 'e see the man fall down laughin' upon 'is 'ams an' curl an' shrivel before 'is eyes like a leetle, sun-dried worm. . . .

"The others were so scared when Toby crawled aboard an' told them this that they clapped 'im in irons straight away, fearin' that 'e should start an' point at them. They asked 'im then 'oo it was 'e seen fall down an' laugh like that, but either 'e couldn' or 'e wouldn' say. When we were three days out 'e died—a leetle more'n a month after 'e seen the Face.

"Of course you've guess by this what I'd made up my mind to do almost as soon as I saw the first of the rubies in the doss-ouse. A couple of nights after Toby died, when we were close-auled off the coast o' Spain, I took the stones from Dr. Gill's cabin locker, put off with them an' two tough lads in the twenty-

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three foot sloop I'd been careful to ship before we sailed, an' left the brig with the water pourin' into 'er through a dozen 'oles in 'er bottom.

"We been through dirty weather in the Bay, an' it was a risky thing to do, but I 'ad to act before we passed through the Straits, an' 'ad run close in to land under cover o' dark. I'd 'ave got away alone if I could, but I was force to 'ave Tiny an' Craddock to 'elp me put the rest o' the watch to their long sleep an' then lower away the sloop.

"All that night the three of us ran before a northerly gale under 'alf a jib an' a reefed mainsail, an' at day-break we made out the landfall to our south-east an' ourselves bearin' away from it a good three points to westward with the wind on our starboard quarter. 'Put 'er about,' said Tiny to me, 'an' inside o' two hours we'll make the coast.'

"Then I put the tiller over sharp, but I never 'auled in on the main sheet as we payed off on the other tack, an' the big boom came swingin' over with a rush. It caught Tiny full in the stomach an' 'e was overboard before 'e could open 'is mouth to yell.

"'You done that a' purpose,' shouted Craddock, an' the nex' minute 'e an' I were at it 'ammer an' tongs. 'E was a big man, too, an' it might 'ave gone 'ard with me if I 'adn't managed to unship the tiller an' crack 'im with it over the 'ead. That finish 'im, an' 'e went over the side as sweet an' gentle as a bag o' flour. I made land alone an hour or two later, an' worked back to London in a cork boat from Bilbao."

The man before us was sinking fast. His long recital

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had drained his energy, but his little, twinkling eyes showed relief at the telling of his tale. Mad he must surely be, yet the story of his crimes at least was likely to be true. . . . Cohen spoke from the growing shadow with a sneer.

"And the rubies; what of them?" he gibed.

Nightmare Jack nodded, and over his face there spread a little, twisted smile that was at the same time almost a snarl of hate.

"Aye," he muttered, "the rubies, by Gar, what of them? Reckon they lost all their juice time they come to me. Reckon they must 'ave done. . . . But anyway I was to keep 'em shorter than I figured. Leetle did I think when I scuttled the brig and when I put first Tiny an' then Craddock over the side of the sloop that there was one waitin' for me at 'ome to rob me o' the stones I'd bought so dear. Like some beeg, dirty ghost 'e stood smilin' upon the quay, an' when I stepped ashore 'e put 'is arm through mine, an' speakin' so smooth an' soft, 'Hello, Jack,' 'e says. 'You're back quick. *Where's all your mates?*' . . .

"At first I only give 'im a stone or two to keep 'im quiet, an' then, not satisfied with that, 'Let's go shares, Jack,' 'e says, 'an' I promise you no 'arm'll come to you.' 'E looked into my eyes as I gave 'im 'alf the rubies, an' I knew 'im then for 'oo 'e was, an' that I should 'ave to give 'im all whenever 'e might nod 'is 'ead.

"Five year an' more 'e followed me easy, 'oldin' me in play like a fish at a line's end, an' all that time 'e never breathed 'is name or dropped an 'int about 'is

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past, for 'e knew I 'ad no need to ask. An' when 'e smiled an' tapped 'is cheek where the stain 'ad been an' talked so slick an' sweet I would call to mind the man that 'ad been missin' from the ten, an' the fellow that Toby 'ad seen squirmin' in the evenin' light upon the docks, an' I knew that 'e 'ad but to lift 'is arm an' point to turn me too into the crawlin', dirty thing 'e was 'imself.

"For you see, sirs, that was the way it worked with 'im, the devil in the rubies, an' on what 'ad run like poison into Toby Charteris 'e could only thrive an' batten as if it were 'is natural food. . . . An' then, when all the stones 'ad gone, five year or more ago, 'e went as well, but till this night the look of 'is eyes, an' the sound of 'is voice, an' the very smell of 'is body 'ave never left me, an' every time I stare at myself in the leetle glass upon the nail I wonder if there isn't a yellow stain that only other men can see. . . ."

His voice for some time had been growing weaker, but beyond this I had noted the gradual onset and the slow completion of another change. As his story passed from a fantastic pouring-out of crime and terror and turned more and more upon that sinister Companion who seemed to dominate its later stages, it was easy to see where his horror truly lay. For at the first, despite the violence and the power of his telling, there had been something almost borrowed and unreal about his tale, reminding one of the precision of some well-drilled schoolboy who recites his horrors second-hand. Latterly, however, as his eyes had stared out into that dim corner where Gilchrist sat and listened, the slow

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clenching and unclenching of his hands and the alternate race and falter of his words had half prepared us all for what was still to come.

Crabbe, too, had marked the growing nervousness of the dying man, and he spoke now with a curious, eager tenseness apparent in his tones.

"And since that time you dream?" said he.

"Aye," whispered Nightmare Jack. "Since then I dream. Ah, 'ow I dream! . . . Got 'em bad I 'ave. . . . But as for that, by Gar, so 'as 'e! Sometimes, when 'e's told me things, I've seen the fear spread in 'is face, an' it's been meat an' drink to me, an' to-night, to-night, sirs, we finish quits, though 'e thought to be the one to put me to my sleep. . . ."

His voice, from which but a moment ago the growing weakness seemed to have stolen all the strength, suddenly rang out in a harsh and triumphant yell which tailed off horribly into a sickening choke of terror. With a display of strength nothing short of marvellous in his exhaustion and his pain he had lifted himself to a sitting posture in the bed and now stared with starting eyeballs at the shadowy form of Gilchrist. Nightmare Jack had raised one hand before his face in a curious, despairing, warding motion, and from behind it, in such an access of mingled hate and dread as I pray heaven I may never hear again, his last words crept out upon an appalling, strangled cry, half whisper and half shriek:

"*Save me, save me from their bloody Nark. . . . The man 'oo speaks like a girl an' smells like a goat. . . . The cat 'as . . .*"

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All at once he stopped and fell back against the pillow. Then, as he mouthed and swallowed in a vain effort to continue, our gaze turned to the pallid, lurching figure that had risen from the corner's gloom.

Gilchrist, he whom men called the Nurse, that indecent thing of whose employ the very vilest were ashamed even while they ate his meat, was staggering and swaying in the centre of the room, and, whilst with one hand he still pressed the handkerchief against his wound, with the other he pointed at the writhing form upon the bed.

For a silent moment the two faced each other. Then, with his glazing eyes still fixed on his tormentor, Nightmare Jack dragged from its station at his pillow the huge, complacent body of the cat. With a last flicker of strength he tore at his shirt downwards from the neck and drew one of the animal's front paws in a cruel, jagged line across his heart. After about a second the blood started from his chest in a zigzag, crimson track, and, with a grin of triumph on his face, his head fell back against the wall, and he slid down dead into the bed.

A little later Gilchrist collapsed in a faint upon the floor.

V

Never a word did the three of us speak as we bore the body of Nightmare Jack out into the dusk where our boat lay waiting, and it was some minutes after we had let it drop over the stern into the seethe and huddle

NIGHTMARE JACK

of the flowing tide that Crabbe, looking up slowly from his oar, said:

"What's happened to the other one? Why did he give us the slip do you think after he'd come out of his faint? He followed us down the stairs all right, and we waited for him long enough."

"Too long," said Cohen. "We wait for him no more. His game's been played with us too long. To-morrow night he sleeps with the man he's driven mad. . . ."

It was only a little later, however, as we were passing above Notman's Wharf, that Crabbe drove his oar into something soft and uttered a startled cry. The light from the lantern which I held out over his shoulder flickered for an instant on a whitish object that bobbed and dipped grotesquely in the suck of water at our stern and then faded back along our wake into the blackness of the night. It was a body floating up stream with the making tide, and one glance had been enough for us to recognise the face.

"Gilchrist—as I live!" whispered Cohen. "Now how, in heaven's name——"

Just then the cat Pongo, which had jumped with us into the boat as we put off, uttered a faint *miaou*, and Cohen swore.

"Of course!" cried he. "The cat! I see it now. Gilchrist must have fainted again and fallen into the river and been carried ahead of us by the tide before we managed to get clear. That was a clever trick of Jack's. I was thinking it must have been more than an ordinary scratch. . . ."

NIGHTMARE JACK

"Why," said Crabbe. "What do you mean?"

"Mean?" repeated Cohen with a little laugh. "Why, that Jack had seen us coming and him with us. He made his preparations, that was all. I saw the cat's feet leave blue marks upon the bed. It's claws were poisoned."

Ten years ago to-day; Crabbe and Cohen gone their ways, and I alone left who can remember the doings of that night to wonder what might be the darker matters that lay behind a madman's ravings. Time passes quickly. . . . And it is strange how soon things are forgotten on the river.

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I

THE ROAD

IN the front-parlour of the dingy house upon the Square Little Ken would sit playing with his bricks.

He was barely seven, rather a shabby youngster, dressed in a jumper suit of faded grey, and over his face, pale save for the patches of too-bright colour on the cheeks, there flickered habitually the suspicion of a questioning frown.

Whenever the brown murk of the November fog stole up along the causeways from the docks lying to the south and east, his nurse Susan would come in and light the gas. The shutters then would be closed, and the sullen roaring of the traffic and the turmoil of the distant river would seem to drop a tone or two and sink back from the old house, muted queerly to a dull and broken murmur like the far-off muttering of a baffled, angry multitude.

To the boy, however, there would yet remain the fascinated sense of that which the closed and bolted shutters scarcely held at bay. He could still feel, with a keenness surpassing that of actual vision, the crowding, secret streets, pressing round about him, encompassing him with their grimness and their mystery, stretching out and away, limitless and incalculable, to that shadowy, dimly pictured place where London ended and the world began.

Outside the quiet room, but a few turnings past the Square, lay the Great Road, and it was to the

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tune of the Road that Little Ken had lived his life.

He knew it in its every mood and every aspect, and the song it sang to him had never changed. He was not afraid of the Road as he was of the maze of streets which hemmed it in, and the strange, hoarse music of its tumult and its strife came to him as he listened with a mellow, echoing cadence like the great, untiring voice of a strong and trusty friend.

Sometimes his father took him for a walk along its crowded pavements, and then, hand in hand, the two would go, breasting its jostle or floating on its tide, bathed in a pensive, saffron-tinted light, lost on a thronging, surging sea, borne on strange waves of sound and colour as craft upon the eddies of some seething whirlpool.

Faces drove by them—subtle, wistful faces, faces rapt and tranced or cynical and remotely cold. Faces framed in curls, in elf-locks, in the ringlets of commerce, in the greying hair of age. Faces, sometimes, of children with the eyes of men. . . . Little Ken, when they stood once more before the seedy house in the forgotten Square, would glance up shyly at his father and wonder whether he too had seen the faces pass and been able, perhaps, to read a little of their story and to understand what made them always hurry, hurry like an ever-flowing stream.

Then they would enter stealthily so as not to disturb his mother, the door would close upon the faces, and once again the teeming and the uproar of

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the streets would fall away to the low, murmurous chorus that he knew so well.

Perhaps it was because of his peculiar and ever-present consciousness of the Road that Little Ken so seldom felt the need of playmates. For as far back, almost, as he could remember, the days within the quiet old house had drifted by, each like the one before it, and he had never found them dull or wished for any change.

His mother's couch, by which he had his morning talk with her, his simple meals with Susan below-stairs, his playtimes with his bricks and picture-books, and above all the reading lesson when his father had returned from the city office—these common, gentle things, fraught with a curious, incommunicable glamour, had constantly surrounded and sufficed him, and amongst them all he had lived and dreamed content.

Books were his especial joy. He had learned to read when he was between five and six, and two dog-eared, tattered volumes—"Christy's Old Organ" and "Peggy's Little Squire"—were his companions, constant and beloved. From them he would weave queer, daylight fancies, impalpable as gossamer, and from them too, when he was warm and snug in bed, would fashion strange, wandering romances, perplexed, fantastic, inconsequent as life itself, going, on and on like the eternal music of the Road until it and they together merged and faded into dream.

Sometimes, however, he would awake with a start in the small hours of the morning to find that the

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Road had ceased its singing, and it was then that Little Ken would grow afraid.

Lying there within the silent room he would become aware of other sounds—sounds usually drowned and unnoticed in the thunder of the great highway, but creeping upon him now out of the darkness and the boding stillness with a grim and clutching menace that seemed to freeze his blood. Sudden shrieks and cries, and the soft pad-pad of footsteps in the haunted streets: queer scurryings and whisperings and perhaps the fitful howling of a dog. He might hide his head beneath the clothes or put his fingers in his ears, but still the sounds pursued him, and it was only when the haggard dawn, cold and tired like himself, began to filter through the shrouding blinds, that sheer exhaustion pressed upon his eyelids and he could fall asleep.

But by that time the Great Road had taken up the burden of its constant song once more.

II

SCROUNGER

It has been said that Little Ken lacked playmates, but this is true only in so far as the dog Scrounger is excepted.

Out by Parkes' Flats, in a rough-boarded midden under a railway arch, had lived a dirty, fierce old man who collected rags and bones, and when he died his cur had set out upon a tour of all the houses on

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his late master's beat, questing for nourishment, sympathy, or both.

He had made bad weather of it on the way, for by the time he reached the Square and Little Ken his mange-smitten back and haunches were blue in patches and his ribs and hock-bones all but bursting through his skin. Also he had parted with an eye.

Nevertheless, when Susan looked upon him she loved him, recognising the old friend of many a Saturday afternoon's excursion to the Flats. He was thereupon adopted, discreetly hidden in the basement, and cherished until he could at length emerge, offensive no longer to the eye and nose, well-liking, almost sleek, urbane now and affable, though still a mongrel and one-eyed.

Upon his arrival he had made short work of a picnic ham (retired) and the ruins of a fowl or two, and Susan, whilst trembling at his prowess and what it boded for the future, had exclaimed with admiration: "He's a scrounger for sure, a right-down old scrounger, mark you."

Somehow the name had stuck, though to Little Ken it came presently to stand in its outlandish suggestion and its very fitness for a certain curious quality in the dog which vaguely he disliked and feared.

For Scrounger had come to them from the streets and carried with him something of their mystery and their menace. His gait was the long and slantwise lope of the thievish curs of night which haunt the laystalls and the rookeries of the eastern river, and on

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his face, pinched by days of want and scarred by ancient battles, there sat that old, half-human wolfish look which is the mark, not of any individual dog but of an army, the army of the great underscum of hounds.

It was the voice of him and of his kind that had so often risen, plaintive and long-drawn, upon the ears of Little Ken as he lay awake upstairs, and it was the dimly felt terror of the evil causeways, the squalid slums, the stews and pest-houses in which Scrounger must have lived his life that laid its hand upon him in his dreams.

By the coming of the waif the besieging, crowding streets had somehow moved nearer by a step, their vast insurgence grown a trifle more insistent, their constant, covert threat a thought less closely veiled.

And so, as often as he met the remote and brassy stare of the mongrel's single eye, there would come to Little Ken the feeling that the sights and sounds of his long vagabondage were not lost to Scrounger, that he remembered and belonged to them, that one day they would call to him and he would have to go.

It is hardly likely that such thoughts and fears as these would have troubled the mind even of a sensitive child for long had not some event served to illustrate and to enforce them.

One day, a few weeks after his adoption, and profiting by the slight bustle and confusion occasioned by the return from Manchester of the tired, faintly smiling woman in grey plush who was known to

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Little Ken as "Auntie Pet," Scrounger escaped through the open door, and for three nights was missing from the Square.

Then, on a cold February morning, with the long east wind driving the dry dust and chaff along the gutters of the roadway, he returned, strangely cowed and frightened. One of his ears was freshly torn, and a zigzag scratch lay deep across his back.

Little Ken overheard Susan talking to the washer-woman in the area.

"Yes," she was saying, "'ticed away no doubt. He used to belong to a rag-bone who died, and the man who took over the old chap's barrow wanted the dog as well, I expect, seeing 's he'd been trained to sit guard over it. I believe I saw the fellow this morning too. The same as was hanging round before, a day or two after the old'n died, a creeping, poor-looking thing with hardly a thread to his back."

"Ah," replied the other woman, "I know 'im. Mr. Shivery Shakes is 'is name, my dear, what's mate now to Ole Sil under the railway arches an' 'elps 'im sell 'is paper whirligigs on windy days. . . . Where your dorg come from, was it? Ah, yes, I mind now, you told me. Wunnerful fond o' dorgs is Ole Sil—an' childer too, they say. . . ." The woman's words ended in a sinister chuckle. Above the area the boy who had been listening at the window turned inwards towards the room. His face was white, and about his heart there lay a queer constriction, a cold, cramped feeling like the tightening clasp of iron bands.

That same afternoon, chancing to look out at the

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growing shadows, Little Ken glimpsed a shambling, crook-backed figure making off into the dimness, and again, a fortnight later, he came upon the dog Scrounger stretched at ease beside the pavement, mumbling foolishly and half ashamedly at a gaudy, multicoloured fragment.

Just before that something had passed against the wind and by the Square to a queer shouting and the noise of grinding metal wheels, and, when the boy had pulled the green and crimson shreds from between the mongrel's paws and gazed at what he held, his pupils contracted in a sick dismay, for he knew then what it was that had gone by.

In his hands lay the remnants of one of the whirling rosettes of coloured paper such as are peddled along the streets of towns on any gusty day.

III

THE HOUSE ON THE WHARF

When the March winds blew in the Square, Little Ken was sent to spend his mornings at a day-school, and, quickly though this new arrangement was to end, it lasted long enough to bring adventure in its train.

The school, kept by an old dame, lay hidden in an alley somewhere behind a jam factory nearly half a mile away, and twice during the first week of his attendance Susan, who brought him to and fro, had taken a wrong turning so that they had lost their

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way. After that Auntie Pet insisted upon joining them, and Scrounger, too, would often follow at their heels.

The hours which Little Ken spent in the small and stuffy classroom passed uneventfully, and it was only because of the episode with which they closed that he remembered them at all.

It was when he had been going to school for about a month that he ran round the corner of the jam factory one day at noon and was met by Susan and the mongrel.

"Where's Auntie Pet?" asked Little Ken.

"She's gorn," said Susan. "And don't ask me where, for I don't know. Why she should slip away in such a nurry goodness only know. There, I didn't follow 'er. Why should I?" The girl was talking more to herself than him and he could see she was alarmed.

That morning at school had been a dull one, and something in his blood rather welcomed the hint of mystery in the disappearance of his aunt. It was not as if she could really have got lost as she had that time two years ago when his father had sat up for her all night and had let her in at last just before breakfast with her dress torn and her face so tired. . . . "We're sure to find her," said Little Ken to Susan. "We can look out for her on the way back."

It was a day of black frost and bitter, ringing cold, with a thin, dry dust ac creep upon the pavements. As they walked, the frontages of mean dwellings and the blind backs of warehouses seemed to be fed up

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to them out of a distant whelm of prisoned sky, the colour of old bread. At any moment it might begin to snow.

Suddenly, ahead of them, he saw her. He knew her by her quick step and grey skirt, and she was just turning round a corner. "There's Auntie Pet," he shouted, and, slipping his hand from Susan's, started in pursuit.

But when, after a couple of minutes' running, he had caught up to within a few paces of the hurrying figure, it turned round, and he saw it was not Auntie Pet at all.

Then he looked about for Susan, and, with a wild plunge of his heart, found she was nowhere to be seen. He was alone and maybe lost.

He tried to recollect his whereabouts and from that to determine the way he ought to take. For a moment he fancied he had discovered it, but saw then that a great block of tenements had deceived him by its resemblance to one he knew. And everywhere he looked he was now confused by its towering counterparts—monstrous and indecent structures in dingy yellow brick that formed somebody or other's Trust and had broken out upon the district after the passing of the philanthropist like the *sequelæ* of a disease.

Down the narrow alley, however, that separated two of these enormities salvation presently arrived in the form of Scrounger. The mongrel's tail was wagging and a curious joy gleamed in his eye. Little Ken followed him with confidence.

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For five minutes or more the dog led him along gloomy, unfamiliar streets and through causeways that every moment grew narrower and more squalid. Then all at once Scrounger veered and darted down a cobbled alleyway, and the boy, as he hurried after, felt a breeze blow upon his cheek and heard the hoot of a steamer's syren close at hand. The mongrel had betrayed him and they had come out upon the river.

Panic seized him and he made a grab at Scrounger's collar, fearing that the dog might now desert him altogether. But the animal easily evaded his grasp and trotted along the side of a small, forsaken quay to a high and ruinous building like a store or warehouse that loomed gigantic at its further end. On it was screwed a metal plate with an inscription: "Duke's Wharf. No. 3." A door stood open and Scrounger ambled in. After him with a wildly beating heart ran Little Ken.

In the sudden gloom he halted, blind for the moment, his eyes smarting and his throat choked and dry. Then sight returned to him by degrees and he saw that he stood in a great room like a barn and that the cur was sitting, his tail still wagging, near the foot of a rough ladder which led up to an open trapdoor in the roof.

Cobwebs hung from the rafters and a fine, musty powder lay thick on everything. It was that that had stung his eyes and filled his throat. In the wooden boarding which formed the wall next the river were a thousand tiny chinks and fissures through which there crept and played as many cold and silent

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draughts, and presently Little Ken saw that all along that side of the floor the grey dust beneath these chinks was crawling and wrinkling upon itself into little pools and mounds and slowly changing furrows.

He could bear it no longer, and with a half-cry ran from the evil place and through the still open door on to the wharf.

And there, to his amazement, he almost tumbled into the arms of Auntie Pet.

She was pale and out of breath and spoke in a hurried whisper. "I saw you," she panted, "from the end of the street. Whatever are you doing here?"

As well as he could, he told her, and then she affected careful deliberation upon what they should do next. Her mouth was twitching, and her fingers were plucking nervously at her dress as she said:

"You'd better go back at once with Scrounger. See, he's come out after you. Go through that other gate and then straight along the road to the church. Then you can see the Square. We're quite near home really. . . ." She repeated these directions, enforcing upon him the necessity for haste.

"But you," said Little Ken. "Aren't you coming too?"

She answered no, she could not. She would explain why later. Only he must hurry off at once. Not by the way he had come. By the other way as she had told him. She was almost imploring him to go.

At her entreaty he went, though fearful and perplexed. He found that she was right as to the distance

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from the Square, and a bare five minutes' walking brought him home without mishap. Scrounger accompanied him, chagrined and subdued, and Auntie Pet arrived ten minutes later. She did not tell him why she had returned alone, and something bade him not to question her.

Then, on the next day, he did not go to school and he heard that he was to be sent for a fortnight's holiday to an uncle near Epping Forest. He fancied that the plan had been suggested by his aunt.

During the week that followed his mind was occupied with the preparations for his departure, but every now and then, in idle and unfilled moments, his thought returned to the deserted wharf and to the empty house beside it that Scrounger seemed to know so well.

And always at these times would come the feeling that had gripped him for an instant when he found the paper windmill, the feeling that something sinister had crept close to him, had missed him by a hair-breadth, and for the time had gone its way.

IV

AUNTIE PET

It was not until the second or third night of his return that Little Ken noticed that the music of the Road seemed faint and further off and that the song it sang to him had changed.

As he sat in the yellowing afternoon it would

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come to him like a distant, mournful voice, and sometimes, pausing from his quiet play to listen, the boy would distinguish a note of warning and regret.

His aunt sat sewing in the fading light and Little Ken would look at her and wonder if she had caught it too.

He thought she must have done, for she would often raise her white face from her work and meet his glance, and then would drop her eyes again, yet not so quickly but that he could see she heard and understood.

Once she had risen from her seat and kissed him passionately till Susan entered suddenly, and then Auntie Pet had somehow seemed frightened and ashamed and taken by surprise, and had unclasped her arms from round his neck and gone back quickly to her sewing by the window.

Then half an hour later Little Ken had come downstairs and stopped outside the parlour door, for voices were raised within. One was Auntie Pet's and he could tell she was half crying as she said: "It isn't fair, oh, it isn't fair. Do you think I do him any harm then?" And just as he entered he caught Susan's reply, given in rough, insulting, and unseemly tones which he had never heard from her before. "No, nor it never can be fair, Miss, as long as you are here. We keep our 'eads shut, but we knows what we knows. An' the boy's my charge, an' I'm 'ere to see as 'e's kep' decent. . . ."

There came then upon Little Ken one of his rare bursts of passion, and, whilst he ran across the room

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and flung his arms round Auntie Pet, his childish wrath rose against Susan, and he railed at her until his words were choked by tears.

That was not the end, for his father, when he returned from Lombard Street that evening, did not read with him as usual, but instead was closeted for a long while with his aunt. And when the two came out at length from the room where they had talked, he noticed that the pink colour had left his father's cheeks and mounted glowing to his forehead as it always did when he was troubled or annoyed, and that in the hands of Auntie Pet her handkerchief lay pressed and crumpled to a little, moistened ball.

Outside, around the Square, the buds on the few sooty trees began to swell, and March was nearly gone. Within the faded house they did not need the gas till after tea, and the tired woman in grey plush sat longer at her sewing by the window.

She never joined the boy in his excursions with his father or his nurse, but stayed always at her seat beside the curtain with her needle ticking and whispering in her busy fingers through the work upon her lap.

Here through long hours would she remain, and seemingly to her ears too that faint and hidden note of warning and regret was sometimes carried in the distant music of the Road. It was a month, presently two, since she had ventured on its pavements or walked across the Square.

The window's lower half was covered inside with a brown wire blind permitting vision only from within.

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V

FEAR

At last he knew what the streets so long had hidden, for he had met their terror face to face. For months he had been travelling down a gloomy passage at the end of which had waited a great Fear. By a thousand hints he had felt it drawing nearer, insidious and bland. It had borne upon him like the foul and expected ending of a dream, and from it there had been no escape.

In the parlour where the light was dim the boy was seated, and to his aunt he told at length what he had seen.

It had come upon him suddenly as he was walking with his father past the entrance to a narrow court that afternoon. Before they reached it Little Ken had heard a sound he knew and had tried to hurry by, but as they crossed the cobbled alleyway he had turned his head and for an instant had looked into the eyes of a strange man who was yet not strange to him.

For in the early hours of that morning the boy as he lay in bed had stirred uneasily and the moonlight had fallen on his cheek. Something then had happened in his brain, and, as dark seconds ran and seemed like years, some lewd and horrid thing had taken shape, and, struggle against it as he might, had risen surely to the surface of his mind. A face he had seen often in a nightmare gradually breaking into

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a secret smile. A streaming, windblown, guileful, amorous face, tossed with a mane of hair, with hungry, ruined eyes and parted womanish lips that longed to kiss.

He had essayed to shriek, but awoke then to find it was a dream. Outside the room sick, grey winds churned and trumpeted in the early dawn. They blew too loudly for him to hear the grind and clatter of metal wheels as they passed below his window.

But the eyes whose glance he met when with his father he crossed the entrance to the court were the eyes of the man who had pushed his little barrow of paper windmills against those blustering morning winds, and the face was the face that now for many a month had threatened in the background of his dreams.

And Auntie Pet, as he sat very still beside her, said to herself that now the end had come and she must go. She and the boy. They must fly ere worse betide. It was not safe to stay.

Yet on the morrow and through many a to-morrow after that her resolution failed her and she held her peace, telling herself that it was only for a time and that she would watch more carefully and later, should occasion force her, would speak out and warn her brother of the danger that had crept so close.

And at the end of every day as evening fell the gas was lit and the shutters drawn, but none save Auntie Pet could see the terror in the eyes of Little Ken or ever guessed the hurt that had befallen him.

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VI

LITTLE KEN DREAMS ON DUKE'S WHARF

Where the evening tide ran out below the Pool and the little tumult of its hurrying waters rose and mingled with the distant chorus of the city, Little Ken lay still within the house upon the wharf.

He was in the upper loft to which the ladder led and he slept stretched out upon the boards, his arms thrown wide. He was so motionless that he hardly seemed to breathe. A mouse crept out and ran between his legs and a long finger of yellow light moved slowly up his body till it lay across his head and showed a thin, red smear upon his cheek. Presently he began to dream.

It seemed to him that in some old time long ago he had been frightened of a face.

It was the face of the man they called Ole Sil, a man with a bent back and a constant, slanting smile, who on windy days would go shouting with his mate along the street, pushing before him a barrow full of whirling paper-wheels. Scrounger used once to live near the place from which these men came every day, and one of them had nearly got him back, for they had but to look on dogs and little children to make them follow.

Apparently he had held the face in fear for many months when he started out with Susan on the walk of which he now began to dream, for he remembered

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that he had met it with his father once and afterwards had told his aunt, who had been frightened too. Since then, although he never let his father or his mother know what troubled him and did not even speak of it again to Auntie Pet, he had often seen the face, and each time it had terrified him more.

He dreamed that Susan, while he went into a shop, had left him for a moment standing near the corner of a street, and that her back was hardly turned before what he dreaded came upon him.

He saw it moving towards him down the roadway, and it was neither a brutal nor a savage face. It was haggard and ravaged as if by longing and in its eyes and smile dwelt something to which he could not give a name.

For some time he stood fascinated without the power to move, but when the face was almost level with his own he turned and ran. And as he gained the next opening from the road and cast a backward glance he saw by the fading evening light that, with pauses and in little, sudden rushes, Ole Sil was running too.

In his dream it seemed that his feet were weighted so that he could hardly lift them from the ground, whilst behind him the sound of the other feet that followed grew louder every moment.

He found himself in mean and unfamiliar streets along which infrequent people eyed him curiously but made no attempt to stay him. He could not call to them for help, for when he tried to shout he uttered nothing but a soundless, choking gasp. Only the

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blind impulse of flight possessed his mind. Once for a moment he fancied that the noise of pursuit had ceased and that Ole Sil had given up the chase, but on looking back he saw him coming by the side of a high wall in a curious, rapid, sidelong shuffle that made it seem as if he did not run at all.

Blood began to surge and drive against the ears of Little Ken and a sharp pain to stab his chest. The pursuing feet were only a few yards behind him when at last and suddenly he burst from a narrow causeway and out on to a little, silent wharf. It was the place where he had been with Scrounger months before, and to his left there towered still the ruinous frontage of the deserted warehouse. Just as he gained the open door and ran into the barn-like room within, Ole Sil, with a curious, low cry, fell upon him from behind and clasped him to his heart.

And now, as he lay dreaming on the boards and the finger of yellow light travelled slowly onwards past his head, the boy's lips parted in a low and moaning cry and he half raised an arm.

Outside the silent house upon Duke's Wharf the ever-running river hurried to the sea, and in its amber-tinted mirror there appeared a row of solemn forms.

For a time, and as the sun went chilly down upon the farther bank, these reflections brooded sombre in the stream; then, as the moored boats began to rock and quiver to the first ripples of a making tide, the images were broken and dispersed, and like them too

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the direst of the shadows that thronged the dreaming thought of Little Ken—the piteously troubled thought of which that warding motion and that cry had been the outward echo—was passed and gone at last.

The uneasy sleep continued, but the worst was over. His moaning ceased and his hand fell idly back upon the floor.

It might have been a minute or an hour before, with a sudden and convulsive struggle, he slid from off the knees of that despairing, loving man and ran wildly for the ladder leading to the loft.

He dreamed that Ole Sil, having locked the outer door, was for some moments unable in the darkness to see him as he climbed. By the time that his pursuer had discovered him and set his foot on the ladder's lowest rung the boy was already gazing down upon him from the room above.

For seconds that seemed like years Little Ken bent over the trapdoor and watched, but he did not tremble now. He knew what he was going to do.

Just as Ole Sil began to rise above the level of the floor the boy, exerting all his strength, upraised the heavy wooden panel on its hinge and brought it slamming down.

With a start he awoke. The slam was real. It had taken place somewhere beneath him. Upon his ears there rose the sound of voices. He tried to get up and to understand what he was doing in this place. He could not remember how he came there. His

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attempt to rise was vain, and he fell back with a dull, frightened cry. His brain swam and his whole body ached. By the time that his father had pushed up the closed trapdoor Little Ken had begun to dream again.

They got him back and into bed as evening fell.

It was the second evening since he ran with Ole Sil at his heels towards the house upon Duke's Wharf, for whilst he lay upon the boards long hours had slipped away, and the constantly recurring horror that had gripped him as he slept within the loft was no mere nightmare, but the shuddering, unconscious memory and echo of what had passed before.

Then for many months brain fever held him. And even when the autumn came and he was well once more, the things that he had dreamed were with him night and day.

VII

END OF THE DREAM

It was November once again and half a year had slipped away. The fog was spreading from the river and they had told him he must hurry home from school, for Auntie Pet was due to visit them by four o'clock.

She it was who on that evening six months back had led the search party to the house upon the wharf. On the next day she had left them, staying in lodgings near at hand until the inquest on Ole Sil was over.

Presently now the boy returned, and from her seat beside the window the faded woman in grey plush

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had seen him coming and stood up to kiss him. Then they had tea. In the evening they sat talking round the fire till it was time for Little Ken to go to bed.

Next morning Auntie Pet left early after breakfast. She had come only for the night, and this, though neither of them knew it, was to be the last time she and the boy should meet.

He wondered afterwards whether she had hoped to speak with him alone and been prevented, and what she might have said had she been able.

He had grown taller since his illness, and the two spots of colour on his cheeks were brighter.

It was at the new school that first he heard his story, as for days since his arrival there it had run inevitably on every busy tongue. Two whispering lads behind a plane-tree in the playground had called Ole Sil his uncle, and for a time he felt that if the words he caught were true he must go tired and weary all his life.

Yet after all he did not trouble much, for in a measure this was what he had suspected. His father once had tried to tell him that all that he remembered was a dream, but the boy had only smiled without reply and the kindly fiction was abandoned. Sooner or later he had been bound to know. . . .

From the conversation of his schoolmates (they were mostly older boys than he, and in their homes the memory of the inquest still was fresh) light fell at once on much that had puzzled him before—the dependence and the shame of Auntie Pet within her

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brother's house upon the Square, her terror when, herself unseen, she had recognised Ole Sil and fled down Craddock Row from the astonished maid, her instant fear that Little Ken's resemblance to herself and to her own dead child would one day work his ruin.

Years afterwards, when she was dead, he chanced upon a letter from her to his father. It had been written whilst the boy still lay delirious. It was a letter of passionate regret and self-reproach which itself in places almost touched delirium. When Little Ken had read it he understood at last why his aunt had never told her brother of the threatened danger till too late. She dared not say that she had recognised Ole Sil for fear her knowledge of his face and ways should show more thorough than might be consistent with her first confession of disaster long ago.

The boy, a youth by then, wondered idly as he read the letter. Wondered at the fascination of this dead fish for that shy and shrinking woman; wondered again, remembering that far-back night when she was lost and had returned at dawn dishevelled and afraid, how much might still lie buried with the vanished mind of Auntie Pet; wondered more idly yet about the esoteric connection which linked the man, the one-eyed cur and that silent, dust-choked house upon the wharf.

Meanwhile, however, he was passing out of boyhood, and other thoughts and plans engrossed his mind. His voice had broken and he wore a turn-

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down collar. He was a member of the local cricket club. Infallibly he would grow older yet, and laugh perhaps if one should tell him he was a bird whose wings were clipped one evening, a flower whose petals had been trodden in the mire.

Yet even now, in occasional and unexpected moments, as some weary London day drew to its close and shadows drove flocking round the Square the uneasy voices down the ever-running river and the constant singing of the Road, crescent towards nightfall with the flood of the home-returning traffic, were almost more than he could bear.

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I

CROWCASTLE was roaring in the wind, and as Isa stood dwarfed upon the hill beneath those giant trees the singing blast dashed water from her straining eyes and would not let it fall, but drove it creeping up her cheeks again until it dried.

Eleven elms of altogether extraordinary height had originally formed the "castle." Three had been blown down some years ago, but the eight which yet remained bore still the semblance of a vast and ruined tower.

To the whole countryside the sharply pointed hill with the plume of mighty trees that rocketed upon it formed a landmark visible for miles around. The ploughman who toiled upon the distant fields of Mell could lift his gaze to see it plain against the southern sky-line and by it guide his team, and the infrequent traveller on the ill-marked, lonely track to Neete would mark its outline with relief and then proceed with new assurance on his way.

In the ears of the woman who stood watching at the feet of the eight moaning elms the gale had raced and drummed so long that by this time she was well-nigh deafened. Before she had left the farm-house in the dip and struggled to the crest to look for Dicky Sam she had been crying, but now the violence of the wind had choked her sobs and she could weep no longer.

For half an hour she had scanned with aching eyes the barren waste that stretched and streamed below

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her, but of the man whose coming she awaited it contained no hint or sign. Far-flung and desolate, the dreary tracts spread wide for league on league, tormented by the raging blast, striped here and there by loose-stone walls and watercourses, empty of all apparent life, upturned towards the dim horizon like the rim of an enormous, sage-green saucer.

Two days ago Isa had looked, or so she thought, for the last time upon her husband, Stanley Dene. He had had no idea that it was to be the final parting that she had so often threatened. He had never paid attention to her threats. He had gone off quite calmly to Mint-Appleton on Monday to see about the new house, and by Sunday he would be back again, expecting to find her awaiting his return and ready the next morning to set out from the old home on the hill with him and Somerson.

Somerson was their boy, aged sixteen. He was a weekly boarder at Roper's Grammar School near by, and would be here on Saturday, a day before his father. Well, by the time that Somerson arrived she would have flown, and he could break the news to Stanley.

For the man for whom she watched and waited in the bluster and the uproar of the gale was now for eighteen months her lover, and until half-past four, when dusk began to fall, she must remain at her station below Crowcastle, straining her swimming eyes at the distant curve of stony road by which, either on this day or the next, he would arrive.

As the wind tore shrieking up the hill and moaned

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in the branches of the labouring elms above her she prayed that he might come to-day. He had not been able to say for certain. He might not manage to fix things up in time, though, he had assured her, he would do his best. He was a retired grazier, more than a little convulsed, as she had sometimes noted with a half-amused contempt, at the magnitude of his adventure. She considered that she loved him, but it was characteristic of her that she had planned already how she could pay him out if he should let her down.

To-day was Wednesday. If he did not come till Thursday it would be running things rather close, for the return of her husband and her son would then loom near at hand.

And there was another reason, unconfessed as yet, for her impatience to take the irrevocable step and fly with Dicky Sam. Already, in the prospect of their impending loss, the caresses of her husband, the tones of his voice—even of his tipsy voice—certain aspects of him as he had laughed, or worked, or slept, were becoming unreasonably clear.

For the first year at least she had been proud of him, for to look at he had been a pretty fellow, with his curly head and blue eyes and little, cropped moustache. He could be nice to one too when the fancy took him. She remembered how sometimes he had crept behind her as she was undressing to kiss her neck and her great, golden mane of unbound hair. . . . Of course he had been "above" her. Ever since he had first met her at her father's farm

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he had always been the "gentleman." He was difficult to understand, though. Look at the way he had taken on when Dicky Sam had bitten her finger in play. A mere lark. Nothing, certainly, to make a shindy over.

For the hundredth time she conned the small arrangements necessary to her flight. The place where Dicky was to meet her was not her present station on Crowcastle, but a lonely ridge across a narrow valley. She stood now beneath the elms because from here she might descry him a full half-hour before he could arrive. As soon as she saw him she had only to return for the small and ready-packed valise that waited in her bedroom and then creep out to him upon the ridge. No one would see her go. This deserted countryside was made for lovers' meetings and elopements. How often she had railed against its loneliness when Stanley took her to Crowcastle! Now it was a sheer gift.

And the only two creatures who shared her present isolation had no suspicions.

Behind her, somewhere in the hollow by the farm, they were at work. Old Snape, who was going to stop on under the new owner, was spreading slag on the Winacre field. Down there, on the lew of the hill, he was sheltered from the wind. Emily, too, her servant, was doubtless busy in the house getting furniture together ready for Cookson's van on Monday. Isa gave a laugh as she thought how little their industrious preparations meant to her. Even the light, occasional sounds which might have risen upon

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her from their ridiculous labourings were now drowned and beaten back by the increasing gale. . . .

Suddenly she started wildly. On the stones of the path that led up to the elm-trees in her rear she heard the noise of crunching boots. It was Dicky then at last. He must have come another way. The steps were almost upon her, for their approach had been hidden by the wind. For a moment she stood, shuddering, and did not look behind her.

Then she turned her head.

A tall boy in a green cap stood before her. His hands were in his pockets, and though she could not hear him she could see that he was whistling.

It was Somerson returned three days too early from the Grammar School.

II

He brought her back along the crest, and when they reached the house and the warm kitchen which served as living room during the turmoil of removal, he proceeded as was his hateful wont to bully her, to ride roughshod over her, to master her and daunt her with his big voice and his laughter, his demands for food and drink, his felicitations on the progress she had made with the stacking of the furniture.

He sat sprawling on a corner of the table with one hand in his pocket and the other twirling his green cap. Occasionally he whistled fitfully. He seemed to fill the kitchen.

And before him she raged impotently. Dicky would come now and find him here and she didn't

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know what would happen. Who was Somerson after all? He was only sixteen. The thing was ridiculous. Why should he come blundering in? Why couldn't he let her come a mucker in her own way if she wanted to? She hated him. He had not even troubled to explain what brought him back so soon.

But presently he remarked casually: "Oh, two of the fellows have measles, so Griggs said all the weeklies might go home. Rather jolly, wasn't it?"

She agreed that it was jolly.

Outside the gale still raged; though here in the hollow they were sheltered from its immediate fury. As soon as they had sunk below the level of the crest on their short walk from Crowcastle to the house, the shouting bluster had dropped from them all at once and been succeeded by a blank and unreal stillness across which fitful puffings of chilly air and eddies from the uproar they had left made little sudden rushes and distressful whimperings. But now, as they sat together in the firelit room, there came to them above the nearer moaning of the blast the steady bourdon note of the eight elms that towered on the hill. Sometimes, when the wind was in the west, that note rose screaming to the high E of a woman's voice, but to-day it was like the sound of a great organ.

Somerson, whilst gulping at the mug of tea which she had brought him, put a question. It came glancing in somewhere amidst his lamentations over a lost stamp-album and satirical comment upon old Snape's slugging in the Winacre field. And yet, when Isa

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realized what he said, it caught her like a sudden blow.

"Whatever were you doing upon the crest?" the boy had asked, his eyelids never flickering.

In the very midst of her confusion inspiration came to her and she replied:

"I was looking out for Dicky Sam. He ought to have been here long ago to help us with the heavy things."

"Oh," said Somerson, and his eyes dropped.

Her answer had evidently nonplussed him, and this frightened her again, for it showed that after all his careless-seeming question had been intended as a thrust. Then her fear gave place once more to anger, and in her desire to outface him she overreached herself.

"And you," she said, "you don't usually bother to come about after me. I suppose you went to the house first. Did you think I'd run away?"

Even as she spoke she felt the hot flush rising on her cheeks and neck, but her back was to the light and he could not see. He replied lightly:

"Oh, I came out to see if Brother Barlowe had blown down. Jacky Seaton bet me sixpence he would have, but I knew he was firm as houses."

In the last Christmas holidays Somerson's friend Jacky had stayed with them, and the boys had amused themselves one day by evolving from rags and sack-ing, broomsticks and a battered bowler hat, a libellous caricature of one Erasmus Barlowe, the founder of some obscure local sect. The discovery of an old tin mask which survived from Guy Fawkes' day had

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roused them to enthusiasm, and finally the hideous figure had been planted high astride a branch of the Home Elm and lashed with twine.

Somerson, having finished his tea, continued to sprawl upon the table and to swing his legs.

Like Stanley he was big-boned and masterful, but somehow invulnerable and self-contained as Isa's husband had never been. She had long abandoned the attempt to understand him. He seemed neither of her flesh nor of her mind. His very name erected a barrier between them, for it was a family name of Stanley's people—the people who had sneered upon her when she married.

And at Somerson's attitude towards herself she could only guess. He had never displayed affection. She knew that in any quarrel between herself and Stanley the boy would take his father's side. And now he had planted himself here to thwart her. He had dragged her unresisting from the crest and was mounting guard over her. Dicky might have come and gone already. And even if he came to-morrow Somerson would still be here. It was almost as if he had suspected. . . . Beneath her silence she was growing rapidly hysterical.

Suddenly the boy stopped the swinging of his legs and spoke:

"The new house," he was saying with a yawn, "will be better than this place. You'll be able to get out to a show or two. I expect you feel a bit moth-eaten up here. Jenkins' mother used to. Mint-Appleton ought to be rather jolly."

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He was approaching her from the table with determination in his glance. The distance between them lessened. She half rose from her chair and almost shrieked. He still came on.

A moment later she had sat down again with her pulses racing and her breath catching.

He had kissed her.

"I wish the wind would stop that row," said Somerson, returning to the table. "You can hardly hear yourself speak. Besides, I'd be sorry if it brought old Brother Barlowe down."

III

Night came and went and the gale had dropped to a light breeze. Isa woke refreshed, for she was of the sort whose sleep no mental stress has power to disturb. She had largely recovered from the shock of Somerson's return. After all, she asked herself, what difference could he make?

If anything, her resolve had been strengthened by her son's arrival. He stood connected only with those aspects of Stanley Dene from which she had determined to escape. And the boy himself could touch no chord in her. She had borne him and that was all. He was no more than his father's henchman, and he was here now, with a shrewd idea perhaps of something in the wind, to see that she behaved herself and didn't do the dirty on his Dad.

She had settled that his unwonted kisses of last evening were mere "blarney," but none the less their

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memory disturbed her, confirming a belief that he suspected something unusual was afoot.

In the morning she went directly to the ridge-top to wait for Dicky Sam, but he did not come, and at noon she returned for dinner. For the moment her attitude to Somerson was one of defiance and she made no attempt to explain her absence from the house. She was hardly disappointed by Dicky's non-arrival, for she had not seriously expected him to arrive before the approach of dusk. He would be certain to come then. Upstairs in her bedroom the valise still stood ready packed.

After dinner, however, her spirits drooped. Listlessness descended upon her, crossed by spasms of uneasiness and fear. Once more she doubted whether after all she were big enough for this imminent and momentous undertaking. Her heart misgave her.

At three o'clock, though she knew it was now hardly likely her lover would arrive till four, she strode out once more upon the ridge, leaving Somerson apparently engrossed with his stamp-album, which he had discovered in his room.

The breeze had veered, and now blew from her down the hill. She stood upon the ridge where it overlooked the main approach to the house and farm. Half a mile below her in the valley's bottom a path diverged out of her sight from this approach and wound up to Crowcastle, to her left and several hundred yards away. It was unlikely that Dicky would take that path, though he had climbed it many a time before. He had used it whenever he wanted

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to leave a note for her in the cleft of an ancient, lightning-stricken oak of which the summit now alone was visible above the shoulder of the hill.

Her glance strayed over to this tree and to the giant elm beside it. That was called the "Home Elm," and formed part of the tower of the "castle." High upon it she could just descry the grotesque form of Brother Barlowe, bobbing and dipping insanely on his windy perch. Below him, on the face of the great trunk which now was hidden from her by a piece of rising ground, Somerson and her husband had inserted footholds and constructed a sort of tiny balcony or platform.

She seated herself presently upon a boulder, and, while her gaze grew vague and her body numbed unheeded, suffered her mind to slip into a sort of troubled trance. Like this she sat for many minutes until a humid dusk had fallen and the details of the hillside and of the streaming land around were blotted from her sight.

Then suddenly she started, for she heard or dreamed she heard a sound. It was very faint, like a confused and broken cry, and for a time she scanned the stunted bushes at her feet and the ridge-top immediately behind her. But before long she apprehended that the faintness of this noise had been the labouring faintness of a shout heard at a distance and against the wind. She stared once more across the valley towards Crowcastle, but now that plume of giant trees was but a fading shadow on the sky.

A terror of she knew not what possessed her, and

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jumping to her feet she ran, panting and with many a stumble, to the valley bottom. Here in the dip, where the trees were hidden from her view, she waited to take breath. Then, as more slowly she struggled up the other slope, she heard the sound again, and, on a sudden intuition, answered it. She shouted wildly: "Somerson . . . Somerson. . . ."

Five minutes later, at the hillside's top, she halted for a moment and then raised her eyes. Above her spread the boughs of the Home Elm. In the increasing darkness they gave her the impression of being curiously thick and weighted, as if heavy and drenched in some unholy dew. The branches moved slowly up and down upon the breeze. It was cold and for some moments very still.

IV

It had been about a quarter of an hour after he had seen his mother set out in the direction of the ridge that Somerson, smoking a pensive cigarette and carrying a length of twine, had proceeded towards the Home Elm.

Four days had now gone by since, roaming last Sunday near the stable-yard, he had come on Dicky's note to Isa. She could only just have dropped it, and Somerson, after consideration, had managed to restore it, placing it with somewhat laboured plausibility beneath her morning-gown, which she had changed and hung up in her wardrobe.

Since then he felt supremely miserable. At first

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he had been going to tell his father, but chiefly from sheer horror at the indecent theatricality of such a course had shrunk from the disclosure till too late. Then after two days of wretched indecision he had run away from school. A panic-stricken wire from old Griggs, the Head, had long ago been due. Perhaps, indeed, his mother had already received and recklessly ignored it. That would be more than likely, for it was plain that she suspected him. Significantly enough, the thought of pleading or remonstrating with her openly had never crossed his mind. Yet, that apart, what could he hope to do, beyond, perhaps, waylaying Dicky Sam? The situation daunted him a little. Once more he broke into a low and worried whistling.

From his present position he could not see the ridge where Isa sat, but from the side of Brother Barlowe, whom presently he should secure with further lashings, he would be able to command the land for miles around. Meanwhile he knew the packed valise was still within the house, to which the approach lay always in his view.

With an anxious frown he consulted a wristlet watch. Dicky's note had mentioned four o'clock as the hour of his arrival, and with the fall of dusk so imminent he might well be close at hand. While still some distance from the elms Somerson halted suddenly, threw down his cigarette, and, his whole body curiously a-tingle, peered forwards down the path. For some moments he strained his eyes in vain.

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But not for long. Presently, across the dimming valley, he descried a man. It was Dicky Sam, and he was climbing, unexpectedly, towards the "castle."

Then, at the sight of Dicky, something happened in the brain of Somerson. The situation which had seemed a little daunting and confused became simplified immediately and indecision vanished. With his heart pounding and his pulses racing he began to run.

But, the next moment, another instinct checked him and he changed his running to a slow and aimless strolling, for hereabouts the hillside was devoid of cover and he felt that Dicky would presently look round.

He was not mistaken. From under his eyelids he saw the little grazier glance about him and for an instant gaze directly at him. Then he dodged hurriedly from view, and Somerson, a second later, glimpsed his grey coat before it vanished round a giant trunk. Dicky Sam had seen him, but did not know he was himself observed. He was hiding behind the Home Elm. Once more Somerson began to run.

By the time the boy had reached the tree Dicky had ascended to the little balcony. He knew now that Somerson had seen him and a foolish, shifting smile played on his face.

He looked down, and in tones meant to be ingratiating said: "'D'afternoon, Mr. Somerson, sir. Not trepp'sing up 'ere, I 'ope."

"Come down out of that," cried Somerson, and

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he found that his voice shook and trembled. "You come down . . ."

Dicky did not seem to have heard exactly what was said. He was lounging amiably over the railing of the platform. "Quite a voo," he mumbled, "one gets up 'ere. Quite a voo one does. . . ."

Somerson's toes were already in the footholds and a moment later he too was on the balcony. As he backed away before him Dicky began again to speak. "No need to be angry, Mr. Somerson, sir," he said. "Not now. Told your good mother so an' all. Too much respect for your dear Dad to think o' such a thing, that's what I 'ave, so . . ."

He stopped there, and the look of foolish amiability faded from his face, for at that moment he had realised the expression in the other's eyes. He cringed, turned sickly round, dragged himself panting to a higher branch, then, thinking that he felt a hand upon his leg, kicked feebly.

Together they worked upwards foot by foot. It was darkish now, and for a minute, till they reached the fork whence Brother Barlowe smiled absurdly on the night, the boy pursued a bundling and laborious shadow. Then, as a grinning spectre seemed to bar his progress, the little grazier turned at last to bay. The puff of his breath which blew for an instant on the face of Somerson reeked foul of whisky.

Dicky had been drinking. He had been drinking all the week to brace himself for his adventure. His brain was fuddled and his muscles flabby.

And Somerson for his sixteen years was very strong.

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It was only for one second, with the struggle nearly over, that he relaxed his grip upon the throat of Dicky, half fancying that somewhere in the distance he could hear his mother calling.

V

She discovered him after she had stood a full half-minute, terrified, beneath those strangely weighted branches of the Home Elm. To her right a match flared suddenly, expiring the next moment in the breeze. Its flicker, however, had lasted long enough to show her Somerson lying several yards away, his body propped upon one elbow.

"What is it?" she asked, when she had run to him. "You've hurt yourself."

He answered her in a strangely gentle, toneless voice. "No," he said. "Nothing much. I was fixing Brother Barlowe and slipped. Just tried to light a fag to pass the time. I'm afraid I've gammed my leg a bit."

As a matter of fact he was lucky merely to have broken it. He had been lying half stunned on the ground for about a couple of minutes when Isa found him, and of just how he had fallen when he did or of what might afterwards have happened to Dicky Sam he could remember nothing.

Of one apparently trivial matter, however, his brain retained the clearest recollection. Whilst he and Dicky had been wrestling on the bough something white and oblong had dropped from them to the

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ground, and even in the heat of that fantastic struggle the boy remembered that the little grazier had held a letter which he had crammed into his jacket before climbing upwards to the balcony. And now, a minute before his mother reached him, Somerson's hand had chanced upon this packet and he had lit the match in order to examine it.

"How did you fall?" asked Isa. She had not noticed the letter which he had now hidden in a pocket. "It's a wonder you weren't killed. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

He was hurt nowhere else; in fact he was hardly hurt at all until, with her assistance, he attempted to get up, and then he fainted. With the help of the aged Snape, for whom she raced back to the farm, she carried him to the house and laid him on a couch.

And there, until the coming of the doctor, he lay still. In bed an hour later, with his leg in splints and his body warm between the sheets, he fell asleep.

But Isa, by his side, sat watching far into the night, and pondered on this ending to her day. At intervals she spurred her mind to indignation at the wrecking of her plans, but, though she tried to smile in self-contempt, she found amidst the welter of her thoughts a curious, sobered mood of acquiescent calm.

She let down her mane of tawny hair and thus remained some moments longer, her fingers clasping and unclasping in her lap. Then tears of exhaustion pressed her half-closed lids apart, and softly rising she put out the light and sought her room.

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VI

All the next day the rooks, thankful no doubt for respite from the gale, went cawing ceaselessly about Crowcastle, so that for Somerson, who watched them from his bed beside the window, their constant circling and monotonous busy-ness became the tyrannous motive of a never-ending dream.

At times the motion of the birds exasperated and distressed him; at times their rhythmic swaying hypnotised him to uneasy slumber. Early in the morning, before it had been light enough for the rooks thus to engross his thought, he had repeated to himself the words of Dicky's undelivered note to Isa, which he had managed to read whilst his mother left him for a moment on the previous evening. The note itself was now in a pocket of his jacket which hung upon the door, but he could not leave his bed to fetch it and re-read it. He could only remember bits of it: "Blossom, I've thought better of it and changed my mind . . . so least said is soonest mended . . . and don't you worry or misjudge me, Blossom. . . ." Until the day broke and Isa came and drew the blind, Somerson had lain awake in feverish wonder about Dicky, so that his head was throbbing and his skin was hot and dry. After that, the sight of the wheeling specks of black had seized upon his mind, but even then his wonder still persisted, though it was a hard, mechanical wonder—the ghost of a dead wonder—which ceased to interest him yet still went on and on and would not let him go.

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Isa had telegraphed to Stanley and expected him that evening. Meanwhile the doctor came and went. He was himself a trifle like a bird—a curious, caustic little man of whom she had been always half afraid.

"See here," he said, "the boy'll do well enough. He'll be all right, but keep him quiet. No, thanks, no wine. I can't stop longer. Got to see Miss Oates. . . . Yes, she's upset about that brother of hers; you know him, Dicky Oates, the grazier. Oh, only missing again. He'll turn up before long. . . . You're looking knocked yourself, you know. I'll make you up a bottle. Mr. Dene back to-night? Ah, glad of that. You'll be all right then." And "Oh, yes," had answered Isa. "Of course I'll be all right."

At about noon one of the rooks, a little larger than the rest, flew twice around Crowcastle, and then alighted on a lower branch. The tree was the furthest of the eight from Somerson—the Home Elm—and on it, slightly higher than the bird, he could make out the form of Brother Barlowe. Before long the rook flew off, but presently returned, and this time seemed to perch upon the shoulder of the effigy. For a while the boy watched it idly, and then, his thought grown vague, dropped into sleep.

When he awoke his father's voice fell on his ears. Dusk had begun to fall. Already the blind was drawn, and, in his feverish and half-awakened state, he felt dismay. He wanted to see whether the rook were still on Brother Barlowe's shoulder. His father now was in the room and speaking to him, but for a

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time he paid no heed. From thinking of Brother Barlowe he went on to picture the encounter of the previous night, and then the wonder about Dicky Sam, the wonder which had been the ghost of a dead wonder, became once more alive and urgent. What had happened to Dicky? Which of them had fallen first? Perhaps Dicky had suddenly caught sight of Brother Barlowe in the dusk and been so frightened that he had lost his hold and slipped. Brother Barlowe was enough to frighten anybody in the dark. . . . Yet the rook had not been frightened. It had seemed much more interested than afraid. It was a courageous and enterprising bird—a bold and inquisitive sort of rook. . . .

Gradually, as he awoke more fully, Somerson ceased to think about the rook, and listened to his father. He could see him sitting in his easy way upon the bed-end, with the lamplight falling on his fresh-complexioned face and on his shining yellow hair and little gold moustache. Somewhere behind him Isa stood, erect and pale. "Leave him, Stan," she said presently. "He'll get excited." But Stanley Dene talked on, about Mint-Appleton, about a sale at Coffer's Dip, about a hundred things.

Suddenly he broke off from this and, rising, said: "Teach you to stop your monkey-tricks up there at any rate. No more Brother Barlowes, please! I found his corpse under the balcony when I came up just now. I should think——"

He stopped there, checked by a look upon the face of Somerson. "Why, what's up?"

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"You couldn't have," said Somerson excitedly. "You couldn't have seen him there. Why, he was up on the fork a little while ago. A rook was on his shoulder. . . . Unless, of course, he got blown down since then."

"But——" began Stanley, and then stopped again.

"Blown down," said Isa. "But how funny. It's hardly blown at all to-day. Well, we can see it from this window."

She passed across the room, and drawing back the blind, gazed out. Upon the others as they waited fell a curious constraint. Presently she turned to them again. "Too dark," she said. "Well, I suppose it worked loose somehow. Stan, let's have some tea."

Then she too halted, surprised a little by something in her husband's manner.

"Yes, I remember now," he said with seeming carelessness. "I noticed he was gone before I found him at the bottom." But his voice, despite his efforts to control it, sounded hard and forced.

He had not said what he had been going to say. It had been dark as he came up the path, yet not so dark but that he could still make out the familiar blodge upon the fork of the Home Elm. Only it seemed to him to have shifted its position slightly and to wear a faintly unwonted aspect. Then, when he came upon the *débris* at the foot, he had concluded that Somerson had replaced the old effigy with another. And now he had been just about to tell him that he didn't think he had effected an improve-

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ment when something which he could not understand, some instinct deeper and surer than his conscious thought, more urgent than mere tact or humouring, had caused him with a strangely sinking heart to change his words.

For several seconds he waited, in an anxiety he was scarcely able to conceal, whilst Isa, marvelling, stood near the door and gazed at both of them. And then Stanley perceived that he had failed in his dissimulation, for Somerson upon the bed was very sick.

VII

They were very comfortable out at Appleton, and Isa, with a cynicism of which she was unconscious, loved her husband. Something had sobered her from the pretty, reckless animal that she had been. Somerson had shown Dicky's note to Stanley and they had left it in the oak-cleft, where she found it two days later. The grazier's body had been discovered on the Monday at the bottom of a disused quarry. It was concluded with satisfaction to all parties that he had fallen down there drunk. There was no one who could possibly suspect that Stanley Dene had dropped him there after laboriously climbing the Home Elm and dislodging him from Brother Barlowe's fork in which his body had got wedged whilst the authentic effigy had crashed, dethroned, to earth.

Isa, with a perversity which Stanley and his son may be supposed to have found trying, would insist upon their picnicking occasionally upon a hillside close

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to Mell. From it, on a clear day, they could look across the valley and mark the distant plume of elms. And sometimes, when the breeze was strong, they would imagine that they heard Crowcastle roaring in the wind.

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ON A stuffy evening in July a group of men were sitting, bored and languid, round their bitters in a corner of Sturtivant's saloon. One of them, Lomax, stretched himself and said:

"Oh, who do you think I saw in Ebury Street to-day? Old Travers-Imray. He was just getting into a taxi. He looked as right as rain."

There was a mild stir of interest. A glass or two was emptied, replenished. Tongues were loosed. Travers about again, eh? Travers, Travers. . . . Let's see, who the devil *was* Travers? Oh, yes, the man who used to come each day for pyramids with Blessington and then dropped out. Wasn't there some girl mixed up in it, too? Yes, that was the fellow. Why, they had talked quite a lot about it at the time. Travers . . . Travers . . . "Something Travers." Ah, of course, "Tragic Travers."

For a while they pressed Lomax for details, plying him with strong drink until he pretended to knowledge of the pattern of Travers-Imray's socks and of the number of his cab. Then they fell more quietly to pondering Imray's story, that rather peculiar "affair" of his, of which so many a bygone pint and vanished peg could have retold the tale.

Yet that was long ago. The Deluge and the Ice Age are remote, but the year before last is always far remoter. Imray and his history were hoary with the outrageous and unique antiquity of two entire years. His name was as an echo.

And, actually, the facts of him were commonplace.

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It wasn't even certain that there was a "story" in the proper sense at all. Nothing approaching technical "tragedy." They remembered him now rather vaguely as a tall young man in a grey suit whose drink was horse's neck in summer and Burton in the winter. He had used to come in regularly enough with Blessington till suddenly he disappeared—as anyone, indeed, might do. But some weeks later came report of him; he had been seen by Jewson down a turning off the Strand—"not shaved or—anything."

Other tales followed, mostly improbable, some quite incredible. Yet even these were garnered and discussed. There was no Imray canon.

For six months at least the memory of Travers-Imray persisted in that place, where after all they had not known him very well. It survived somewhat scantily in competition with the urgent topicalities of tips and shows and girls, but somehow it did survive. For this there was no explanation. It simply was grotesque.

Then, almost in a night, his legend died. The faint, innumerable repercussions of him ceased abruptly. His ripples spread no longer. They had been swamped in a far greater troubling of the waters—a tidal wave, a waterspout. A man called Sinclair who assisted at the bar sometimes when Sturtivant was out absconded with the till and Mrs. Sturtivant. The guilty couple were arrested at Southampton. A *cause célèbre* unfolded its chromatic length before delighted eyes. There had been knives and threats, a night-club, bedroom

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scenes, a praiseworthy attempt to murder. There had been every circumstance and apparatus of Romance. Nothing, except perhaps cocaine, had been omitted. Sturtivant, a demi-god, was honoured, fêted. Obscure young men in grey were properly forgotten.

And now, with those conjectural fireworks so long exploded out of Imray's sky, his resurrected story sounded oddly meagre. It seemed *démodé* and a little sheepish. The fellow had imposed himself upon them out of all proportion to his merits. Why, at this very moment he was hopping in and out of taxis and wearing purple-spotted socks!

Discussion flagged and would have passed to other topics if Travers-Imray at that moment had not walked into the bar.

He had, as it happened, been standing just inside the door for a few seconds before they noticed him and had chanced to catch a murmur from their table. "Cold facts," Lomax was saying. The voice was thick and indistinct. But presently "cold facts" again—disparagingly. Somehow he guessed their talk had been of him.

He walked up to the bar with his back towards them, pulling himself together. He had to wait a moment for his turn, and while he was waiting he saw the reflection of his face in a little glass erection that contained cigarettes and chocolate. This reflection frightened him so that he was almost on the point of turning back and leaving Sturtivant's.

But that was not to be. Jewson had seen him. There were handshakings, slappings on the back.

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He found that after all it was quite easy. They were only ghosts.

He had for some weeks been bracing himself for this encounter, for the curious interest which Sturtivant's had taken in him once upon a time was not without a fainter counterpart in his own mind. He had thought upon the place at whiles affectionately. He had vaguely counted upon getting what he used to get out of the homely reek of smoke, the steady hum of talk, the winking rows of bottles on the shelves, the popping corks, the chaff, the wide humanity. . . .

In this, however, the event had proved him wrong. The place was no more Sturtivant's than he was Travers-Imray. He laughed and smoked and chatted with the best. He absorbed the facts (not very cold) of Sturtivant and of his erring wife. After the bar was closed he had a game of Russian Pool.

Then he walked back alone to his hotel. There had been many offers to accompany him, but just at this point his endurance must have snapped. He loitered along the Embankment and then up Northumberland Avenue, and all the way he kept saying or thinking to himself: "Well, that's done, anyhow!" He had done it and it had been a failure, but he was glad that it was done.

In yet another quarter his "affair" was now officially past history. Its obsequies had been observed in many pints of bitter ale.

And, actually, the worst was over. Like every other ill this fever, too, he knew, would run its course

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and find an end. Already he might be considered convalescent. After a bit, perhaps, the thing would do no more than incommode him. But he thought it always would at least do that.

He reached his hotel and gazed out upon the jewelled ring of Piccadilly. "Look here," he thought, "let's get this thing in hand. This rotten thing. Let's size it up."

There was a chair beside the open window, and for a long time he sat there with the lights from the electric sky-signs winking and climbing on his face and on the placid night. "Cold facts," he said, "let's have cold facts. What do they come to after all? A rotten, two-a-penny tale that any greasy chap might tell around a pub."

But as yet the matter was too recent to be so out-faced. The unreasonable itch of it stole tingling like an ichor in his veins, the memory of all that high excitement he should not know again.

He wandered out once more into the night. It wasn't very late, about eleven. He struck westwards by Piccadilly and the Park, then made his way by Bayswater towards Notting Hill.

† Beside a pillar-box he stopped, for it was easy to foresee where this would end. The farther road, the turning round a church, then presently, inevitably, the house. The moon was not quite risen, but already in a first suffusion of the coming light the streets, shop-fronts, hung vaporous, their outlines and their distances confused, as seen through mist.

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Over the way he could make out the shuttered portals of a café.

He braced himself and drew a sharper breath. Beyond the café, farther down the road, were other things—a cinema, the corner by a square, a second pillar-box. With a distinctness flattering to cold facts he could remember them. He heard the heavy beating of his heart.

He laughed: "A two-a-penny tale!" and strode upon his way.

It was brighter now, and the moon, almost at the full, skirted the roofs to keep him company. Beneath its light the streets, the silvered walls, seemed floating, frozen, passionately tranced, and the thought struck him with a moment's warmth that on the whole they looked less harrowing, thus seen, than his imagination would have painted them. Time and again through fascinated nights, drenched haggardly in sleep or starting out of dreams, his memory had haunted in these tracts. By day, in sudden noontide silences so still he seemed to hear the breaking of his sweat, he'd pictured them. He smiled. Two years of that had given to Holland Park, the lines of meagre plane-trees round the square, a certain classic and resounding quality.

And now, that clutched and nightmare sense was with him still, its essence drugged the air, clung to the very stones. Yet not so bad, he told himself. Not quite. He couldn't have done this twelve months ago.

A laden 'bus roared up. He jumped and found a

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place. He'd cut the business short, get out at the next stop, walk to the house, return.

He alighted at the square, turned sharply round the church, then halted, lost.

The house had disappeared.

In place of it there stood a block of flats. From one a yellow light streamed out. A figure passed within.

Once satisfied that actually the house was gone he didn't linger. A momentary stupefaction was succeeded by a sense of anti-climax so that he laughed aloud.

At a refreshment stall close by he halted, and with a queer effect of recklessness drank coffee. A swelling volubility possessed him and for a while he chatted to the owner of the barrow. The flats were up a year ago, he found. Municipal? Ah, well, no rats at any rate, nor damp. . . . In pocketing his change his fingers felt a card. He drew it forth. Young Jewson's. He must look him up. He slid it back and turned with a "good-night."

The church clock struck—midnight. The moon was high, but under it the road, the trees, no longer seemed to swim.

At the next corner he crossed over to the tube, and as he took his ticket, a phrase which he had used before recurred to him: "Well, anyhow, that's done!"

He felt a moment's hard and shrugging worldliness. Such was the incorrigible levity and suppleness of human nature that, even in the most superb examples,

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the stuff of it was not quite fine enough, thank heaven, to keep heroic griefs undimmed. That saved a lot of worry! Rank agonies became in time mere dull and homely nuisances like stomach-aches; in longer time, with luck, the pebbles in a shoe.

There had been nobody about the booking-hall when Imray entered it. It was unfortunate for him, as it turned out, that he had walked, head bent, into the lift, and that he did not raise his eyes until its gates had clanged. Up to that moment he had thought himself alone.

They were discussing it next day at Sturtivant's. Most of the morning papers contained a brief account of the "fatality," but long before those bald advertisements appeared young Jewson knew of it. His card had been discovered on the body and they had rung him up. Imray, it seemed, had fallen from the platform under an incoming train.

His legend had been rehabilitated. Life, which was ordinarily so casual and so crude in its effects, had in this instance displayed a surprising sense of the theatre.

"He must have lost his balance," Jewson said. "I mean, it was an accident all right. He was quite cheery when we saw him last."

"Good Lord, of course. . . . He wouldn't be that sort. . . . And, anyhow, he'd quite got over that affair. . . ."

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WITH an unspoken curse Pietro Succi gave his head a downward, peck-like jerk, twisted his shoulder round, and bit his upper arm. The fit of coughing which he stifled in his sleeve convulsed his frame, passed, then returned more violently. And each time that he coughed Pietro bit.

At last the paroxysm left him. He raised his head and with a cautious venom spat out the earth which filled his mouth, gritted between his teeth. His body was damp with sweat. He was weak and panting from strenuous exertion and from his smothered rage against the cough which nearly had betrayed him.

The narrow tunnel at one end of which he crouched was perhaps twelve yards long, but Succi reckoned it in years. Two yards a year, that made six years. That was the time it took a man to burrow downwards through the earthen flooring of his cell, to drive a level passage underneath the prison wall, to start at last with feverish hands and wildly beating heart upon the upward trending slope that led towards freedom and the light of day.

Humped half-asquat within the elbow of this gradual ascent, Succi could catch the glimmer of the lamp that shone all night outside his cell. The light had to pass through the grating over his door, to filter downwards through the boards that screened the opening of his burrow, to struggle finally along the horizontal passage. Yet by this niggard radiance Succi could see as plainly as most men in the daylight. He could see the knots in the boards which

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he had used to reſet the ſides of his tunnel, could even ſee the blood that dulled the glitter of the nail upon a lacerated finger. He had developed the eyes of a bat or of a mole.

With a curious illuſion of remoteneſs the ſhadowy viſta of his burrow ſtretched in a dwindling ring towards the grudging trickle of the light, but cloſer, at a little farther than his hand might reach, the upper portion of its circle was occluded by a ſtraight, black edge. That was the bottom of the priſon wall, he thought. He looked at it and frowned.

Even now, with liberty, freſh air, a bare two yards maybe above his head, the thing diſmayed and baffled him. Hardly a board that ſtayed the tunnel's ſides of which he ſhould not know the form and feel by heart, hardly a ſcar upon the ſtubborn ſoil to which he might not give a proper ſtory and a date, yet of the grave miſcalculation which had brought him up againſt the lower courſes of the wall inſtead of ſeveral feet beneath it he could remember nothing. It muſt have added at the leaſt a fortnight to his tale of ſtrenuous days, for it entailed an awkward dip and, till he worked beyond it, a painful cramping of the limbs. Strange that he ſhould have ſo forgotten! For ſome moments he regarded it perplexedly, then with a ſudden paſſionate intake of the breath he turned. Enough that it was paſſed. Another hour and he ſhould be free. Feveriſhly he recommenced his labouring.

He was ſtill panting from excitement and from the violence of his toil. The ſweat which had chilled

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upon his body made him shiver till his renewed exertion warmed him once again. He worked with both hands clasped about the handle of a chisel, prising and clawing, using his fingers to tear out the loosened clods. The earth fell pattering round him in a chilly, softly crumbling shower, matting his hair, tickling inside his loosely fitting shirt, filling his eyes and nose, making him choke and grunt. Once, in a frozen rage, he stopped again to clap his mouth against his sleeve, fearing a fresh attack of coughing, but presently the irritation passed and he continued. A cough now, he fancied, so short a distance from the surface, might well be heard above. The sound might carry upwards. . . . And then, perhaps, detection, and the wrecking of the work of years, a thing for him far worse than death, a thing to crack the heart.

He strove in desperate haste, for he had burned his boats behind him. It was now or never. The work that he should do to-night would, at an earlier stage, have taken him six months. He had calculated matters to a nicety. Now, on the final lap, it was no longer necessary to carry back the earth laboriously to his cell, plaster it evenly upon the floor and cover it with straw. He had merely to let it fall about him, packing it roughly downwards with his feet. Unless he had seriously under-estimated his distance from the surface there would always be an opening left to breathe by.

The tunnel took increasingly an upward trend. Behind him lay the little pile of boards which he had

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brought to prop the sides. They were the last the Governor had sent him, the remnants of a packing-case. After the first two years he had been allowed to occupy his time in fashioning as best he might from rude material such as this a host of worthless trifles—brackets and little cabinets, a table even and an ornamental stool. Of what became of them he had no notion, nor was he curious to inquire. They were removed as soon as made, gravely, without comment, but with the suggestion of a stern pity, by the sphinx-like warder who carried him the wood. Enough that they had served his turn, they and the chisel. As for the boards, he would hardly need them now. In half an hour or less the burrow should be vertical, and then . . .

With a tightening at his chest, a curious prickling and tingling of his skin, he realised that at last the time had come, the moment he had longed for, the distant goal of years, the crowning of his days of planning, stolen nights of toil. Already he was actually outside the prison wall, even his toes had passed that fatal boundary. The earth rained round him in a steady and increasing shower. It was much softer to work than he had thought. The going was strangely, unexpectedly easy. For a second he stood puzzled, vaguely disconcerted.

Then, with a bracing of his muscles for the ultimate assault, he began again to battle upwards, and as his body strove and struggled, Pietro's mind, released, fled skimming backwards.

In a kind of vivid dream he saw himself as he had

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stood eight years ago, desolate for the first time within his cell, gazing with unseeing eyes upon the truckle bed, the freshly littered straw, listening in a dry anguish of despair to the fading echoes of his gaoler's tread.

For an unreckoned time his mind had frozen in a curious suspension of emotion. Within it none the less the feverishly imaged details of his trail had revolved grotesquely.

He came of humble but aspiring stock. At twenty-five he had inherited from his father one of the small quicksilver mines by Veggia. He had married, bought a villa near the coast. The mine was managed by a Sardinian named Torriani, a bitter, yellow-visaged man, whom gossip credited with a passion for Pietro's wife. One morning Torriani vanished, but a fortnight later his battered body was discovered at the bottom of a disused shaft. Pietro was arrested.

His trial dragged throughout the flaming heat of a Sicilian summer towards a pre-destined end. A thousand nothings had declared his guilt—forgotten jests that turned bewilderingly to subtle threats, the raked-up story of some fatuous, years-old altercation over cards, innumerable significant and sinister mischances. . . . Pietro, calm throughout three torturing months, broke down at last before his lawyer. "But," he cried, "they don't understand! You see? They don't understand. I'm innocent, I proclaim it, innocent!" The lawyer, shrugging wryly, had with a bitter smile replied: "Ah, well, as it

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happens you're a lucky one. I can tell you that you've escaped the life term. They're commuting it to forty years." That irony, however, was lost upon Pietro.

Now, as his fingers tore away the over-roofing earth in their exultant fury, he felt a dim amazement for these early days. What had his life been like, how had he lived at all without this hope, this secret and engrossing dream of liberty, to nourish and sustain him?

Quite plainly he recalled the birth of his idea. Two years or more had passed since his conviction and he was busy hoeing a bed of garlic in the Governor's garden. Such jobs were granted in reward for good behaviour. Raising his eyes a moment from his work he had looked up and seen the sunlight glitter on a pane. He had been long enough within the prison to realise that a little farther to the rear beneath this pane was situated his own cell. In a flash it had come to him. He could be no more than twenty paces from the outer wall. Some day he would escape!

Reflection, while it brought to light unreckoned difficulties, had strengthened his resolve. A number of circumstances favoured the attempt. For one thing, the wood and mallet and the precious chisel! Besides that, the prison was old and antiquated. Upon the mainland it could never have existed. It had been extemporised half a century ago from the ruined stronghold of some fallen noble house and served since then for the incarceration of ladrones and occasional banditti from the hills. His own cell had an earthen floor. . . .

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It was in the night that he had worked. At first he had used a nail and after that the taper of the chisel blade which he had pulled from out its wooden socket. The blunting and the rusting of the other end would have aroused suspicion. A hundred pitfalls lay in wait for an unwary step, a hundred far-off chances of detection had had to be envisaged. The smallest things disclosed a lurking menace, the veriest trifle might betray him instantly. Even the cleansing of the chisel-end, still more of his own person, required elaborate thought and preparation. Impossible to use his drinking water; he had had to lick and afterwards to spit.

With the deepening of his burrow fresh obstacles arose. The opening had to be covered with boards and then with straw. It became increasingly an arduous task to free his clothes and body of the soil that covered them. Finally he had feigned a liking for lying on the earth to cool himself. His warder, fortunately, was an unsuspicious giant from the plains of Lombardy.

There came one day the rumour of an inspection of the prison. In each cell old straw was to be removed and fresh laid down. Pietro spent a night in the meticulous plastering and levelling of earth upon the boards that hid his tunnel. It was not, however, until week had lengthened into weary week that the inspection finally took place. And meanwhile all his work was at a standstill. The matter cost him full two months' delay.

So through six years of striving, planning, had he

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toiled on undaunted towards his distant goal. Beneath the semblance of a bowed dejection he had developed an amazing cunning. True, he had made the tunnel, but truer that the tunnel had made him. He had given it of his best, and as requital had acquired courage and enterprise, resource and swift prevision. His wits were tempered danger-sharp.

Of dire necessity he had achieved the very refinement of dissimulation. Amongst his keepers he was held to be a man whose spirit had been broken by his troubles. He had overheard them once as they discussed him. Their words had made him chuckle. He, broken! He who had wrought a tunnel with the sweat of brain and body, the ungrudging agony of years! He was above them all, the clods, the fat-cheeked, swine-fed dolts! He worked more gleefully that night for knowing how he had outwitted them.

Thus with the steady lengthening of the tunnel a secret and increasing pride had burned within the soul of its creator. Pride—and another and intenser feeling of which the man himself was unaware.

Slowly, unconsciously, the focus of his powers had shifted. The tunnel, from being a means to an end, had grown itself to be an overmastering passion, filling his days and nights, absorbing his whole being. Like a difficult and an ungrateful child it called unceasingly upon his time, his labour and his loving care. His life was dedicated to its service. He was become its creature and its slave.

Once there had been excitement in the prison. A man was pardoned. He had been a convict longer

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than Pietro—fifteen years. Fresh evidence had come to light and he was free. A miracle! There had been a glimpse of him as he passed unsteadily along a corridor in a grey shirt and trousers, his face vacant, staring. He did not look happy. Liberty had merely dazed, bewildered him. Pietro felt no envy. Not thus to him should freedom come at length. Not as a gift—Pietro should command it!

And now, at last, the time had come, the time towards which his every thought had strained, his every energy been bent. . . . A few more moments and he would have left the tunnel. It would be no longer his. In the midst of his feverish labours a sudden chill passed down his spine, a shudder almost of dismay.

His tunnel! Like the recurring motive of some splendid symphony it had run through his life, informing, unifying. He had served it as an artist served his art, a priest his faith, a worshipper, a devotee. For years on end he had assessed each day by nothing but the handfuls of brown earth he carried backwards to his cell. Those strenuous, troglodytic hours had done their work on him. He was become the slave of one idea, a scheming, resolute brain directing hands that clawed and tore, a man no longer, only a Creature that could Tunnel.

Yet now was not the time to waver, falter. The work which he had carried almost to completion awaited coronation. Success alone would set a seal upon endeavour. To fail was to be false to what his strength and skill had fashioned, to prove unworthy of the masterpiece he had created. Besides, the

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moments sped. He must be free three hours before sunrise at the least. The nights just now were never very cold. He knew the country well. With any luck he would have gained the forest-covered foothills before the dawn had broken. And then, by stealth and fleetness to the Northern coast, running by night, hiding throughout the day. He wondered how his wife would welcome him. He pictured her surprise.

Suddenly he paused. His heart gave a wild beat. A clod, untouched, came tumbling of itself upon his feet. He put a hand upon the place from which it fell. Just for a second the crumbling earth seemed to strike faintly warm upon his finger-tips.

His brain swam. Save for his cramped position in the tunnel he would have fallen. After a while he felt again. The warmth was nothing, only his imagination. Yet no! Placing his fingers on the earth a little lower down he thought he could detect a difference in the temperature. The lower soil was cooler by a shade.

He struggled to collect himself, but as his hand had felt the earth his heart had given a sick drop. He was curiously weak, exhausted, not by his savage toil so much as by some strange and clutching terror, a vague and haunting fear, that sapped his strength and drained his energy. A sense of ominous impendence weighed him down. In vain he tried to grapple with he knew not what. The thing evaded capture like a dream that mocked him.

In the close silence of the tunnel's end he waited,

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listening, and, as he waited, something crept and stirred minutely in his brain. He could hear the hammering of his heart—it sounded like the beating of a drum. He could hear the drive and surge of blood against his ears, the tiny whispering of the damp and wounded earth about his head. And now between these sounds, a voice, a memory. . . .

His haunting dream had slowly gathered shape. A threatening image rose before his eyes. He saw the bottom of the prison wall, its ruled and level edge, that wall that should not have been there. He saw himself as he had stood dismayed a moment gone, his hand upon the earth that had seemed warm. He saw at last a vacant, goggling face, the face of someone passing down a corridor, the tautly white and staring face of one whom liberty had terrified. . . .

He turned and in a final frenzy tore wildly at the soil above his head. He struggled, but the presage of some imminent disaster sucked his strength. A foreboding, black as death, had gripped his soul, a baffling, nightmare sense of unreality.

He had dropped the chisel and was working with his hands alone. There were stones now and suddenly the blood ran trickling warm about his fingers. A smother of earth fell blinding, choking, in his eyes and mouth, but still he battled upwards. As from some frightful dream that holds its victim still upon the parting brink of sleep he struggled to awake. Once and again his brain had tottered, bursting, on that fatal verge. . . .

He realised that he was shouting, cursing, but his

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outcry did not cease. A blind, unreasoning fury had possessed him.

Suddenly the earth above him stirred. It fell upon his neck, his shoulders, in a murderous, crushing weight. He gasped for breath. As by degrees he fought his upward way he felt a burning heat. His eyes were blinded by a torturing light. Something was roaring, booming, in his ears. Surely the sound of voices.

And, why, it was broad day!

He sank exhausted, dazed, upon the ground. He rubbed his eyes and, blinking, looked about him. Where was the prison, where? Whose were those faces peering at him through a fence?

For a while he sat, bewildered and dismayed, then, as he heard a step behind and felt a touch upon his shoulder, his confusion ended. Of course, he could remember now, remember perfectly. This was his joke, the little joke he played so well. These were the people who had come to watch him and applaud.

The fire left his eyes. His frenzy was replaced by an abashed docility. Upon his grimed and bleeding face there broke the flicker of a wistful smile. A pair of unseen hands assisted him to rise.

He shuffled slowly off, dropping upon that firm and friendly arm. He was weary, weary, and very hungry.

Presently he knew that they would give him supper. His smile attained a preternatural tenderness.

For a short time after he had vanished the little crowd that had collected to watch Pietro Succi's exit

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from his burrow stood chattering by the fence. It was rare fun to see that shouting, frenzied thing with whirling, flail-like arms come thrashing upwards from the ground. Good fun, and nobody the worse for peeping, although his people did make such a fuss. It was worth ten *lire* any day to watch. Besides, it only happened about once a month.

After the rest had scattered, two peasant lads remained beside an opening in the fence.

"And now, you see," said one, "that's how he always does it. Just like a badger, isn't he, or else an earth-bear from the forest? They only start the tunnel for him and he finishes. He thinks that he's escaping from the prison. Seven times I've seen it. The greatest sight in Veggia—or anywhere in Sicily they say. Why, once there was a man who came to see him do it from Palermo."

"But why," inquired the other, "why does he want to tunnel? And was he really in a prison once?"

"Yes. He was eight years in the prison. They thought he murdered someone. He was just escaping by his tunnel when they pardoned him. It made him mad. And now he always has to burrow."

For a while they hung, fascinated, staring upon the place from which the madman had emerged. Then, with a final shuddering glance, they slowly turned away.

THE DOUBLE ADMIRAL

I

THE story of the Double Admiral presents so many startling and inexplicable features and is altogether so peculiar that were not its truth vouched for by a bishop one might well hesitate to believe it.

The bishop in question, one John Charles, received in the October of last year a letter from an old friend, who invited him to spend a quiet week-end at his seaside bungalow in Hampshire. This friend was a retired admiral, now in failing health, whom John Charles had not seen for several years. The bishop had, however, heard enough of his queer way of life to be curious to visit him and put certain strange rumours to the test, and moreover, in reading the admiral's letter, he fancied he could detect a peculiar urgency hinting at something more than a mere desire for congenial company.

John Charles at once decided to go, and so, wiring his acceptance and catching an afternoon train after a somewhat hurried lunch, he found himself being greeted by his friend upon the little, wind-swept station only some six hours after the receipt of the letter.

Something was certainly wrong. The hand which shook his was cold and trembling, and the gaiety of welcome was obviously forced.

Reserving any comment upon his friend's appearance for a more convenient time, John Charles chatted the usual amicable nothings as they drove together to the Bungalow. "By the way," said the admiral,

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as they drew up before the little, white-painted building, "I told you Beverley was here, didn't I? He'll be glad to meet you again. There he is now! I can see him at the window."

Descending from the trap, they stood for a moment in the salt sea-breeze as the driver helped the bishop to take out his luggage. Beverley came forward from the house and shook John Charles's hand.

He was a tall, silent, and rather dreamy man with dark eyes and a quantity of black, springy hair. The bishop, who had met him once or twice before, was privately inclined to despise him as an inefficient dabbler in psychology. He had a little, secretive therapeutic establishment in town, where he called himself a "psychist," and interviewed temperamental maidens at a kind of dusky shrine.

When John Charles's luggage had been taken upstairs and the bishop himself had followed it to remove the stains of his rather tiresome cross-country journey, the admiral and Beverley went into the dining room, where a cheerful fire spluttered and dinner lay temptingly upon the table.

"Beverley," said the admiral, "do you notice anything different in it to-night?"

The psychist turned away from a window to the fire, so that his face shone in a strange mixture of half-lights. "No, Hood," he said.

The admiral walked over to the window, and the two looked out together over a patch of lawn, rather dreary in the failing light, and swept now by a hurrying little breeze.

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"You can't see it from this window," resumed the admiral, "it's round the corner—just there." He pointed to one of two other windows that gave on to the sea and the lawn in front. The blinds of both were drawn.

"Does *he* know?" asked Beverley with a meaning lift of his eyebrows.

"No. Not yet. I'll tell him after dinner. Hush, here he comes!"

John Charles entered, and after him the soup, sending up a most inviting steam. As they sat down came the sound of the rising wind, sighing round the cliffs, and panting about the windows like a curious person wanting to look in.

During the meal conversation languished, and it was not until the admiral's man, Thomas, had disappeared, and the three were comfortably seated round the fire, that the host began to talk. He addressed himself particularly to John Charles, whilst Beverley stared into the flames with the resigned, half-grudging air of one who listens to an oft-told tale.

"You're wondering, of course, why I sent for you, John," began the admiral. "You're wondering what's up, what's wrong. I'll tell you. I've told Beverley and got his opinion, and now I'm going to get yours."

The shadow of Beverley's head, flying madly about the far corner of the ceiling, seemed to work in an ecstasy of approval. The admiral glanced at it and at the real Beverley, and went on:

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"When you came into this place, John, did you notice anything?"

"I noticed at once how unwell you looked."

"Nothing more?"

"I don't think so."

"Ah." The admiral, sallow and pouchy-faced, bent his dark, restless eyes upon the fire. Outside the wind still whispered curiously. And within, ever and anon, would come the soft hush of falling ash, like a respectful commentary.

"This house," went on the old man, raising his left hand and talking hurriedly, "is Bad, and it's I that am the centre of its badness. You can see that I'm not well; no, but I'm not ill in the ordinary sense either. Listen! I've gone *bad*. Do you know what's wrong? I wonder, if you looked at me very hard, could you guess what's going wrong?"

"Hood," said the bishop breathlessly, "what do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. I told one other man besides Beverley, and—he laughed. By God, I'll kill the man that laughs again! Now look, look into my eyes, and tell me yourself what you'd say was wrong!"

It completed the strangeness of the situation that the bishop should be asked to answer his own question, yet in the tense, electrical moments that followed he found his brain working to an inevitable conclusion. He was conscious of the old man's black eyes, glowing in the firelight like fervent beads, and conscious, too, of something weird and terrific in

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his whiskered face; but above all he became subtly aware of what he was to say. The waiting pause grew, as it were, in meaning to the coming answer.

"I think I know what you mean, Hood." For a brief moment he paused again, looking at his friend's sallow face. Yes, there was the answer, evident, written terribly in every line of that wasted countenance. He went on. "You look, somehow, as if something were preying on your mind, as if you were frightened of something. I should almost say, of course it's only a fancy, that you thought you were being tracked, followed. In fact, if you were what you looked, you would be . . . yes, Hood, you would be a haunted man!"

Again there was a silence of some seconds. Beverley knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and the bishop, who found that he had bent forward in the peculiar excitement of the moment, straightened himself up.

The admiral spoke. "It's something we see a long, long way out at sea," he said. "It's not always there, and sometimes it goes altogether."

"What is it?" asked John Charles bluntly.

"We call it an island," said the admiral. "It's a kind of brown stain just on the horizon that comes and goes. Beverley has seen it too."

He stopped, and John Charles looked inquiringly at the psychiatrist, who held his face averted.

"But other people, Hood; what do they say it is?"

Beverley answered. "Other people," he said, "do not see. I do not always see it. I think——"

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He broke off suddenly. The admiral was speaking again, and now his words seemed to flow monotonously in a strange unnatural smoothness. His eyes were fixed upon a point on the opposite wall.

"I can't escape from it. It follows me everywhere. Sometimes I come in here, where the blinds are drawn on that side, but it makes no difference. I can feel it there. It's there now, just there." Without disturbing the rigid fixity of his head, he extended his left arm to the window, pointing.

"Old chap," said the bishop kindly, "you must get away from here at once. Spend a week or two at the Palace. Grace'd love to have you."

The admiral shook his head. "It would be useless," he said. "About a week ago I took the train inland to Eastham. I thought I'd got away from it. I spent most of the day there without seeing it, and then, as I was having tea in a little restaurant, I looked up out of the window. There it was, far away over the top of a hill, the same brown, evil shape——" He paused, and into his eyes crept a look of terror. The woodwork round the windows ticked meditatively in the wind, and ash fell again from the fire—sympathetically.

"The important point to notice," remarked Beverley, "is that the sight or even the thought of this thing is accompanied in Hood's case by a distinct waning or attenuation of personality. A continual tapping or sapping-away of mind; how did you describe it, Hood?"

The admiral answered, his head thrust forward

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towards the wall over his long legs, "When It comes I seem to lose something. I can tell when It's coming. I have an awful headache first. Then something seems to be drawn out of me, sucked away. I can't explain it. Yes——"

He broke off, excited, seeking, as it seemed, for words. The firelight dancing on his face showed up long wrinkles playing over it as his mouth worked quickly. The two listeners were about to interrupt him, but swiftly he hushed them with his hand.

"—Virtue or something. It's gone, and I can feel it drawn away from me over the sea. I've felt like this before, as a child. As if something inside wanted to break away and fasten on to something else. That's it."

"Do you know," said John Charles, "I was like that, something, when I was a kid. Certain things had the most awful, indescribable horror about them. . . . A yellow stain on the ceiling in my room, a particular picture in an old book (I used to know the number of the page and skip it so I wouldn't come upon it), an old, broken post along the railway line to school. . . . It's funny."

"Old chaps like me," went on the admiral, waving at them as the woodwork ticked feelingly about the window-frames, and the psychist and the bishop, somehow saddened by the sound, looked regretfully about them, "—Old chaps like me are set on in this way. Such poor old chaps. Listen! I shall go out one day and meet the Thing. It's killing me. I—I—I am being undermined!"

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II

The bishop takes up his story at the point where, on the following day, they set out in the admiral's cutter to visit the mysterious island. It is apparent that he joined in the amazing expedition with the prime object of humouring his old friend, particularly as he was quite unable to see anything more terrifying than a few trails of low-lying cloud hanging over that portion of the horizon to which the admiral pointed. He had eaten a hearty breakfast, and was impatient of the terrific moments of last night's talk.

It was about ten when they started off, and John Charles, sausage-like in his white sweater, looked somewhat regretfully over the stern at the receding shore. A light, shimmering haze hung about, but the sun promised soon to dissipate it.

For some time the bishop, who was very content to leave the management of the boat in other hands, sat back, comfortably pulling at his pipe and thinking deeply. He was extremely sorry that his friend was suffering from such an unexampled attack of nerves, and renewed his resolution to get the admiral away to the Palace. No other possibility than that of "nerves" ever presented itself to his mind—the conversation of last night seemed particularly silly in the sane morning light, and even the tragic and mysterious Beverley looked fairly normal in his boating flannels.

Seated under the boom, the admiral was gazing over the sea before him. He was crouching forward

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with his head stuck out, so that his hands dangled between his knees. Some wisps of lightish hair, faded like his whole appearance, were caught and blown about his forehead by the wind. Sometimes they would get into his eyes, and then impatiently he would put up a hand, but apart from this he was sitting in a strangely tense and rigid way.

Idly the bishop watched the trysail above him so smoothly curving outwards in the breeze. Fixing his eyes on the truck of the mast, he followed it as it plunged in and out among the clouds, tracing shining lines and patterns with the motion of the ship. Gulls about the coast screamed, bickering, and ever and anon the pleasant break of dry and straining ropes came rhythmically. John Charles was very comfortable and exceedingly disinclined to worry over anything. Happily he dozed, cherubic.

Presently, however, Beverley aroused him to take his place at the tiller. He did so, relighting his pipe which had gone out. Half an hour must have passed since they set out, and they were making fair progress though the wind was light and shifting. Up to this time they had hardly exchanged a word.

As they left the shore behind them and stole forwards, with some tacking, in the supposed direction of the island, a peculiar feeling began to settle over them. The strangeness of the expedition, which so far had, as it were, passed itself off as a holiday trip, again became apparent, and above all the silent figure of Hood, sitting unnaturally still, filled them with vague misgiving. About this time, too, the rather

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sinister visage of the psychist, suddenly swinging round and snapping its eyes at John Charles, reminded that dismayed prelate of the very picture that had so terrified him as a child.

"How far are we from the shore now?" asked John Charles, less from interest in their position than from a keen desire to break the silence. "About three miles," answered Beverley. "You can't get much out of her in a wind like this. Is the course right, Hood?"

"Keep straight on for a bit," said the admiral, "straight on. We are getting near."

Again there was a long break in the conversation, and again an indescribable feeling of misgiving settled over John Charles. Something in the dreamy, sunlit day, something in the light, wandering winds, seemed growing tense and strained to breaking-point. As the water lap-lapped against the sides of the cutter, and the tiller creaked in his hands, an almost uncontrollable desire to cry out came over him. This, however, he resisted, and they proceeded in silence as before.

It was now, when the bishop was in the grip of these strange forebodings, that he saw the island for the first time. For some little while he seemed to have been half conscious of a darkish shape that dodged behind the mast with the movement of the boat, but it was not until this moment, as the cutter tacked suddenly to port, that the sombre smudge upon the sea rushed, as it were, to the opposite side, and hung over the starboard bow.

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"Look!" whispered John Charles to Beverley, pointing at the shape.

Beverley nodded but made no reply. He was looking intently at the admiral, who still sat motionless, staring straight before him.

The dark mass that they were approaching was curiously vague in outline. Straining his eyes at it, the bishop thought he could make out the appearance of cliffs, but owing to its distance, and the peculiar haze that hung about it, it was impossible to determine anything with clearness.

They held on their course for about another five minutes, and then tacked again so that the island was brought on to the port side. Beverley was looking at it through a telescope, which he presently handed to the bishop.

Nothing more was to be made out through the telescope than was visible to the naked eye. A brown shade seemed brooding over all that portion of the sea, contrasting strangely with the sunlight that shifted on the water lying wide around. John Charles turned the telescope to the shore they had left, and then swept the horizon. Far away a large, three-masted barque was making up channel, and to the west a dark speck upon the sea, that might be a sloop beating to windward, was slowly creeping in their direction. Than this not a sign of life was to be seen.

John Charles offered the telescope to the admiral, but the rigid figure made no motion, so he returned the instrument to Beverley.

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The wind, which at the best had been but light, now almost quite forsook them, and they crept with irritating slowness through the water. Strangely enough, however, the boat which John Charles had noticed a minute or two before had now approached to within about three-quarters of a mile, and seemed to travel in the tail of the departing breeze.

Beverley was looking at it curiously. Presently he put up the telescope and gazed long and fixedly.

With his naked eye John Charles could see easily that the boat was cutter-rigged, and might, indeed, be an exact replica of their own. Further, three dark figures were seated on the deck, one at the tiller, one beneath the boom, and one, darker and plainer than the other two, craning forward under the mast.

In the warm, creeping sunlight the bishop felt himself shivering. His head was aching violently, and he had for a moment that strong sensation of contradictory motion that sometimes comes upon one in a train. He could have sworn that somehow the direction in which they were travelling was not that of a minute ago.

"Hood," whispered Beverley to the admiral, "look at that boat, Hood."

There was no reply.

The psychist strode over to the mast where the admiral was sitting, and John Charles, from his station by the tiller, saw that his face went suddenly drawn and ashy. "God!" he cried out to the bishop. "Come here! He's gone, poor old chap!"

John Charles leapt to his feet and joined Beverley.

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Together they looked down at the thing below them.

Still rigid as if carved in wood, the figure of the admiral sat staring out to sea. In this rigidity even the chin was thrust forward with a horrible appearance of jocose truculence, and only the long arms still dangled slackly between the knees with the motion of the vessel. In the big blue eyes wisps of pale hair were blowing in the wind.

With a cry of dismay the bishop went up to the corpse and shook it gently. It heeled over, and fell half prostrate against the mast, but the pale eyes remained fixed, staring ever forwards.

Beverley bent down, and put a hand against the figure's heart. "Dead," he said. "It's no go, Charles!"

"Beverley," asked the bishop, "Beverley, how did he die?"

The psychist made no reply. Instead he took up the telescope again, pointing it at the boat that had passed them a few minutes back. It must have been moving very rapidly, for its three queer figures were no longer discernible, and it was fast fading from sight, pitching and tossing, as it seemed, into the gathering mist ahead.

Suddenly Beverley spoke. "Do you know where Hood is?" he said.

The bishop looked at him in amazement and made no reply.

"I'll tell you where he is," went on Beverley, and of all words John Charles had ever heard those that

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now followed seemed most fraught with sinister suggestion. "I'll tell you where Hood is; he's in that boat that passed us, along with you and me. I saw him through the telescope."

As he let the import of these words sink into his mind the bishop stood gazing, now at Beverley, now at the body of the dead that, like some frightful doll, sat staring past him into vacancy. Then he looked at the sea round them, and a fresh confusion mingled with his fear.

He was facing the stern, and far away he saw the uncanny boat, now but a dark speck in the distance. And to its left, where the shore should have appeared, was visible instead a vaguer mass that lay upon the water like a huge, dun cloud. Hastily the bishop turned and looked for what had been the island. As he half expected, it was gone, and in its place stretched out the shore that they had left.

There is a peculiar momentary condition of mind which psychologists have styled "vertigo of direction." It may be brought about by coming out suddenly on a familiar place by an unaccustomed way so that ideas of relative positions receive a violent and bewildering contradiction. In some persons the shock may even be so great as to cause temporary mental incapacity, and John Charles for some seconds remained half-stunned whilst his mental compass achieved reluctant readjustment.

It was true enough. The bishop's uneasy sense of contrary motion had received a sudden confirmation, and in the peculiar bewilderment of the reversal he

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even forgot for a moment the existence of Beverley and the horror of the admiral's death.

Before them lay the shore as they had left it an hour or more ago. There was the tall cliff that rose to the east of the slip, and there in the background the billowy stretches of the downs lit up queerly by moving points and splashes and slowly creeping bands of yellow light. For some time, unable to shake off the persistent notion of the original seaboard at his back, the bishop felt as though something, playing frightful pranks with Nature, had set up against the familiar Hampshire coast another shore that answered to it hill for hill and cliff for cliff.

A queer, exotic quality seemed loose upon the air. Soft winds were blowing, and within John Charles's head the violent aching passed away and a host of yearning little tunes arose. Something unreal, something of the dreamy shimmer of the mirage, seemed to hang about the sunlit coast before him. Out of the golden haze strange shapes seemed to tower and beckon to the bishop. . . .

He stood looking at them, oblivious of all else, his features drawn with pain. The prospect seemed beset by a haunting beauty, a sweet, fantastic madness. Those cliffs that hung above the gentle sea. . . . The bishop prayed to them in a fierce agony of desire as to a face half-mocking and torturingly dear.

Now he reeled. He was gone haggard with this beauty. Gusts out of the ineffable breathed upon him. He clutched at the collar of his sweater and

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prayed again. "Our Father," he said. Dimly, as he was falling, he glimpsed Beverley out of the corner of his eye. He was conscious of a dislike of Beverley. He wore dirty flannels, which psychists should never do. . . . No. . . . A shower of strange inconsequences, a last mad scamper of flying thoughts, a last vain effort to size up the tremendous and perplexing things that had assailed his mind, and then . . . oblivion, purple-tinted and delicious. A lordly thing.

One of the most human and pathetic points in John Charles's remarkable but evidently sincere narration is the way in which he describes his attitude to the Second Admiral that he discovered upon awaking. "Everything," said Beverley, "depends upon the completeness of the reversal. This man is to all intents and purposes your old friend. Think of an hour-glass; when the sand begins to fall from the upper into the lower bulb we have what can be called a leaking or sapping away of the higher mass, but as the process nears completion it is better to speak of the construction of the lower than the destruction of the higher."

"Beverley," asked the bishop, "has the sand nearly all trickled through?"

"I think so," answered the psychist, "the second Hood appeared as you were unconscious. That was seven hours ago."

The last scene that it is needful to record took place the same evening. Disaster, says the bishop,

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overtook the kindly efforts of Beverley and himself to hide from their friend the real nature of the case. John Charles was describing his sensations to the psychist, when suddenly the admiral, whom they had believed to be upstairs, came in upon them. It presently appeared that he had overheard their conversation and was curious to learn its import.

The bishop forced a laugh. "I've just had a nap," he said. "What I was telling Beverley was a dream. Something you gave me for supper last night has evidently played the very dickens with my constitution."

Beverley grinned. "Very realistic," he said, "particularly the last bit about the beloved cliffs. Most oriental. Like Omar Khayyám gone a little mad. That, of course, was the cucumber."

The admiral poked the fire. "No," he said slowly. "No, Beverley, old chap, I'm afraid that won't hold water."

"Why not?" they chorused hoarsely.

"Because," said the admiral—and a world of terror was throbbing in his voice—"because, unfortunately, I've had a nap as well, and—I've had the same dream too!"

THE GREY HOUSE

I

IT WAS a small house, and in front of it two twisted, sooty trees seemed to bicker venomously. Round it drab streets anastomosed, and shrivelled old sinners in shabby coats played wintry tunes on fiddles. At least, this was the kind of setting Hammond gave the house. Looking out on south-eastern London from One Tree Hill, he knew, of course, that it was lost in the general wilderness of grey; yet still he felt it there, that subtle, hidden presence, a single stipple in that dim half-tone, a single note in the dreamy, multitudinous chorus of the city.

To Hammond, thus reviewing London very fixedly from the heights of Crofton, the House seemed peculiarly insistent. His eyes would roam over the great stretch of sombre masonry, from Nunhead and Brockley just below him out across Denmark Hill and the waste of Camberwell to that distant greyness where the river curled. And sometimes his gaze would halt, and he would wonder if he saw the House. Very patiently he would try to remember it, the House of the two trees and the mouldy stone vases on the lawn.

It was then two weeks from the November evening on which, leaving Sir Windrop Winton's in Queen Anne Street, he had been whirled away most astoundingly in a taxi at breakneck speed round Chandos Street and Cavendish Square, down Princes Street, out on to Oxford Street, and along Charing Cross Road, and so by the Strand and Waterloo Bridge into the desert of southern London.

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That was in the evening. The quick slide of yellow lights past the windows was suddenly hidden by dark coverings that dropped like hasty blinds on the outside. Mr. Hammond, astonished, but gripping his amazement very firmly, made quick note of the fact that at the moment when the windows were covered they were just turning out of Chandos Street and into Cavendish Square. Some little time later the sudden change to the rough jump on macadam from the colourless, dry glide across an asphalt surface told him they were crossing to the Surrey side.

Hammond, deprecatory as always of the abnormal, felt his pulse and noted the beat of his heart. His head was aching, and a suspicion that he was being suffocated made him go to the communication tube and smell at it. The faint odour of dirty metal and perished rubber was reassuring and eminently sane.

It was useless to holloa up the tube, at any rate as yet. In what appeared to be a case of kidnapping he decided that he had better try all other expedients before those of bribery and threat.

For the next five minutes Hammond and the darkness about him, heavy with the smell of damp leather, were cutting across midnight London at thirty miles an hour. He was sensible of this Darkness enveloping him as of a real entity, almost a companion. He could assess its personality as he could that of a human being. And above the two, conducting them as it appeared with a kind of resolute suavity, sat the Driver.

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After ten minutes the form of this driver became almost clear to Hammond. He was, by looking back over what seemed a long time, able to remember this tall, black figure in a wrinkled mackintosh. Hammond had hailed him as the car was passing slowly just outside Sir Windrop's, and, having climbed inside and closed the door, and called out his destination with his usual dry distinctness: "Nineteen, Calthrop Gardens." The figure had seemed to nod assent, Hammond had fallen back among the cushions of the car, and then, suddenly, he had been whirled off into amazement and the falling shutters had plunged him in utter darkness.

He felt for matches, found two, the last in the box, and lit one. The momentary gleam was not instructive. The interior of the taxi was entirely ordinary, and the reflection of his face in one of the windows, cold and black against the screen outside, was eerie and disquieting. The match died out and he struck the other.

With it he lit a cigar, and, puffing, thought things out. He found, as they continued their remarkable journey, a peculiar contentment stealing over him and a great disinclination to alter his position. He had, of course, tried the doors and found them locked, and was now surprised to discover himself quite relieved by the fact. Somehow, in this closed cube of blackness, cigar in mouth, steeped in a peculiar languor, he seemed to be slipping fast away from the life he knew, the quite interesting but rather monotonous existence of an elderly dabbler in philosophy, into

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something rare and strong and pleasantly familiar. The taxi rocked—they were going at breakneck speed—and outside, he felt, string upon string of houses was fleeting by them into blackness. Within, meanwhile, Mr. Hammond, sucking his cigar and pondering wisely, was being borne thus wonderfully into the great Unknown.

The most remarkable point about the whole thing, as it appeared to Hammond musing upon One Tree Hill, was that he could remember nothing of what happened between his journey in the taxi and his discovery of himself on what seemed to be the early morning of next day, standing up, still within the car, and looking at a small, grey house. He seemed to be drawing his breath in something of that regretful feeling of finality that comes at the end of an enthralling play. Passively, almost, he had seen the blinds fall again, and had felt himself borne once more over what appeared a considerable distance. During that time, to complete the preposterous fantasy of the whole adventure, he recorded his impressions in a note-book, regardless of darkness and vibration. On being set down near the corner of Forest Hill Road, at which point the door seemed to swing open spontaneously, he rushed round to the front of the taxi to see the driver, but the vehicle started too quickly for him, and vanished almost immediately. A dark form alone was visible for an instant, and the queer shrouds over the windows streamed flapping in the air like sombre scarves.

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II

One Tree Hill was a place adapted to meditation of the distressful kind. On clear days one could look for miles away on to the northern heights across all the sounding gulf that lay between, and even when the fog hung heavy in the valley one was still able to consider the triste affliction of sad sister hills looming dimly through the murk.

Again and again would Mr. Hammond take his seat here beside a little tree, and wonder over his adventure as his gaze wandered over the tumbled sea of London. Somewhere in the distance under the shrouding mist, the House stood. Sitting up there, and looking out to the dim north-east, he seemed to feel it returning his regard like a hiding, watchful thing. A mile away it might be, or two, or three, he knew not where, yet very surely as his glance swept over the limitless drab expanse, he felt that out there, buried and covered in the midst of all that baffling entanglement of winding streets, the windows of the House looked out like the eyes of an ambushed creature.

The whole adventure seemed to him so unreal and fantastic that he had not mentioned it to a living soul. One is, perhaps, to understand that fifty years of spiritual desiccation had rendered Noble Intimacy almost impossible to Mr. Hammond. Nobody could have imagined that really fervid and immoderate things did sometimes occur within his mind, and so

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his purple moments, when they were achieved, were entirely private and unsuspected.

It is a weakness of such natures to keep diaries, often displaying a lamentable introspective power, and Mr. Hammond's journals were doubtless of this description. The notes that he had made in the taxi drive to One Tree Hill he carefully revised and rearranged. He became more and more conscious that he had undergone a unique and probably valuable mystical adventure. In particular, the blank in his remembrance of what had happened on that astonishing night was altogether inexplicable. It grew steadily clearer that whatever might have occurred in the grey house was something out of line with ordinary fact, something parallel to it perhaps, but neither one with it nor contrary to it; a kind of vacuum in Experience, as he phrased it to himself. How, he asked, could he justify or refute this astounding conviction? How, if the House really existed, could he work his way back to it, step by step, through all the mazy turns by which it had been left?

His first scheme smacked of the rather obvious and uninspired methods of the detective. The notes that he had made had been written in a violently jolting car. So much appeared quite plain and matter-of-fact; could he, thought Hammond, by noticing the way in which his pencil had scrawled out at certain points, deduce the directions of the turns that the car had made as the notes were being written?

Slight reflection showed that this plan was utterly impracticable, and he thought out others, equally or

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still more futile. As the impossibility of discovering the House became ever more apparent the strange fascination that it held for him increased, and with it the conviction that he had stumbled into an experience of the highest mystical significance.

It was nearly three weeks after his adventure that Hammond's idea came to him. He had been whirled away to the grey house on the night of the seventh, and this was the twenty-sixth. He was standing in his little plot of lawn in Calthrop Gardens looking at the last yellow leaves fluttering from the trees when suddenly the thought occurred to him: "Why try to work backwards to the House from One Tree Hill? Why not set out from the original starting-point in Queen Anne Street?" Assuredly, having lost his first arrow, he must shoot a second after it.

The queer idea, then, that had visited the heated mind of Hammond was so to prime Circumstance that, dropping in upon its tide at the psychological second, he should pass once more through those strange and bewildering things that he but half remembered.

With a feeling of high elation he purchased a pound's weight of small red beads, confided in detail and for the first time in a Friend, and got himself invited to Sir Windrop's, securing a Friday as the date.

III

Through some confusion of expression and a good deal more of thought one can still see pretty plainly

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in Hammond's diary what his intention was in going again to Sir Windrop's. "A black taxi with flying crape," he thinks. "Peculiar! I had better dine at the same house at the same time, and stroll out into the same street. The taxi will be there." He tries, as his diary shows, to find some analogy to the kind of operation he contemplates. Riotous phrases are scribbled about. He is "playing pranks with Experience," "setting Life's alarum," or "probing a metaphysical false-bottom." Altogether it is evident that he found considerable difficulty in explaining to himself in any set terms the exact nature of his "experiment."

That experiment (we have it from Sir Windrop himself) he conducted with calm and deliberation. "Winton," he said, "do you remember what you were telling me the last time I was over here? Rather an interesting case I thought it. I seem to have forgotten a good deal about it though. Tell it me again." Sir Windrop, a heavy man with a mind of elephantine gait, considered ponderously as he poured out a glass of port and viewed it with one eye screwed. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I remember it. It was like this. . . ." We must picture him conversing, the measured cadence of his periods broken only by sippings at his glass and the sharp, nervous voice of Hammond.

The guest thought: "This is silly. I can't cheat Experience like this. My idea is that with all the points set the same way the engine will always travel along the same lines. But I can't get all the points

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set the same way. There are hundreds of 'em, thousands, millions. Yet p'r'aps some only are essential—my particular emotional tone, I expect. Now last time I was here I was thinking about when I was a little boy, and a long, black hearse when Nurse died (I must make a note of that). . . .”

Sir Windrop Winton leant over and tapped on his guest's shirt-front. “I tell you,” said he, “it is so. You may agree with me, or, of course, you may not, but it was most undoubtedly a case of that precise description. I should swear it on my death-bed.”

“Yes,” said Hammond dreamily, “such a nice death-bed. A brown blanket with funny figures on it like little men marching. They covered her over, of course, with a white sheet when she was perfectly dead. . . .”

Under the weighty disapproval of Sir Windrop, and no longer thinking of laying traps for Circumstance, he walked out into the night, and strode quickly down the pavement. A cold wind was blowing, and it caught Hammond's neck-wrap so that the ends flapped streaming past his ears. Thus he progressed like some symbolic figure of strain and effort, butting at the wind, doggedly, with his silk hat.

Again an ineffable sense of high elation caught his spirit, and under the windy, starlit heavens his mind seemed to flash back into that mysterious, breathless state of wonder and airy trance. Only once or twice before had he struck it—a state that lay full of childhood memories and pulsed all aglow with the vibrant

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joy of one who lights suddenly and expectedly upon something long lost, long forgotten.

Thus, let us say, he passed along towards the bottom of Cavendish Square, and reached the spot where before he had found the taxi. A sudden dismay came upon him as he noticed that nothing was to be seen of the strange vehicle or its driver. Had he omitted too much? Were the circumstances too dissimilar for history to repeat itself? No, that was his old, wrong idea, ridiculously naïve and crude, born only of a moment's madness, the idea of trapping Experience as one might trap a hare or a mole. It was the mental state that set the cue, that counted, and that alone. Other conditions were adventitious and unessential. Yet, no taxi. . . .

As quickly as it had arrived his dismay was ended. Behind him, creeping swiftly with a curious absence of noise, came nosing a long, black taxi with a tall figure at the steering wheel. He wondered whether the driver wore the same wrinkled mackintosh, and whether those were flapping scarves that he could make out streaming from the windows like dusky pugarees.

For a moment he hesitated, wavering, with one hand stretched towards the door. Then the taxi seemed to open to him spontaneously and he found himself sunk inside upon the cushions. Quickly the door slammed to, the driver threw in the clutch, and the queer blinds fell, plunging him into darkness. Again. They were off.

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IV

Very early on the following morning, when the dawn was flushing the eastern sky over Hackney Wick, a long, lean man in gaiters ran out of his house and took a tube to Queen Anne Street. He was the Friend to whom Hammond's experience had been confided.

He set out at a brisk pace along Oxford Street by way of Princes Street, and then turned into Charing Cross Road with his eyes glued to the ground.

Presently he stopped with a half-suppressed cry and picked something up. It was a tiny bead of ruby-coloured glass.

Farther on he found more of them, and for an hour he followed the trail, panting, dodging trams and drays, execrated by carmen and eyed suspiciously by constables.

By eleven o'clock he was well into southern London, and entered a small restaurant, where he had some sausage rolls and a quarter of an hour's rest.

He started off again hot-foot, for the beads were plentiful, and reached Lee Green by way of Lewisham shortly after noon. A little later the beads diverged sharply to the east along a common and then stopped.

It was a cheerless spot. To the north lay the river, and opposite it the road to Woolwich wound along the top of sad clay cliffs. There the gaudy brick of houses newly built flared in the surrounding grey, and behind them the motor-buses of line 66z flickered a consequential scarlet.

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The man who had followed the trail reviewed the position sorrowfully. To him it was patent that his friend had been caught terribly away from life—from riding on suburban tram-tops to the Institute, from reading Bosanquet and Stout and Bradley, from producing careful, decorative speeches at the British Academy—from everything, in fact, that mattered.

He pictured Mr. Hammond fallen horribly out of all this amiable futility down some pernicious kind of drain or trapdoor, which Circumstance, by an awful oversight, had left unclosed.

Near him on the ground were discernible the ruinous foundations of ancient dwellings. His brain swelled and beat in the excitement of a theory. They must be the vestiges of former buildings which had flanked the marsh, and it was possible that amongst them had stood the House of Mr. Hammond's story. The unfortunate philosopher had fallen through some deplorable chink in his own century into the one behind it!

The man in gaiters became so excited that he gesticulated to himself. Presently the bizarre possibility glowed to certainty within him, and rapidly he sketched out headings for a paper on the case. In the following Spring, when it was abundantly evident that Hammond had disappeared never to return, it was this very paper that raised its author to the pinnacle of fame as the propounder of a new theory of Time and Space.

After a while he wearied of these anticipated glories

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and noticed that the sun was slanting yellower towards the west. With a last glance at the crumbling ruins and the sad sweep of the distant river he boarded a crimson motor-'bus, and so returned to tea and Hackney Wick.

TIDE-BORNE

I

THE bottle, its course determined by the ebbing tide and fitful breeze, but chiefly by the will of an inept or an ironic providence, must first have plunged into the Thames above Kew Bridge just as Old Coote, his ledger closed at last, drew on his coat and gloves, assumed his rusty "tile", and shambled shivering forth from Briggs and Struthers' counting-house for lunch.

Along the fronts of shops as he had turned into the crowd that surged down Ludgate Hill shutters had rattled upwards with a merry slam. On any ordinary Saturday he would by this have started on his way to Barnes, but to-day his sister, Emma, who kept house for him, was visiting her mother. For safety she had taken the keys with her, and until her return at five o'clock Old Coote was thrown upon his own resources. He had been forced to face the tenpenny "meat and veg." in Sampson's Cave and then to fill the intervening hours as best he could.

After a leisurely but frugal meal he had gone as far as Hammersmith by 'bus, and then the fancy took him to loiter for a while along the river-side at Chiswick Mall.

A faint December sun shone redly through the rising river-mist. Along the roadway the muddy edges of the ruts which it had thawed already creamed and hardened back to ice beneath the feet. Somewhere below the parapet a distant group of children shouted over treasure left by the receding tide.

Old Coote, unconscious of malicious destiny, strolled idly on.

"Old Coote," "Bandicoot," or merely "Bandy"—to the junior clerks at Briggs and Struthers' Publishing Office he was known by all or any of these names. Not that they dared to cheek old Bandy to his face. Old Bandy was too much of an Institution to be made game of openly. An "Institution." He had heard himself called that and it had pleased him, solaced him somehow. Peach-faced and smirking boys, the down of youth hardly grown razor-long upon their chins, had passed above his head to "Sales" or "Royalties" with a metaphorical flourish of their coat-tails in his eyes, but Old Coote had remained consistently superior, the "Institution." For five and thirty years he had walked up Paternoster Row at two minutes to nine and down it on the final stroke of six. He was conscious of his virtue without, however, glorying in it. Any less rigid punctuality would have seemed to him a studied insult to a house of Briggs and Struthers' standing. Where other firms along the Row proclaimed themselves as "Juvenile & General," as "General & Devotional," or even, startling combination, as "Juvenile & Theological," it was alone above the sombre front of Briggs and Struthers' that the golden letters ran "Devotional & Theological." Thus was it that whilst rival clerks might strive and struggle for the feeble show of dignity, Old Coote dispensed, exhaled it. If he had lived in a less flippant age and been, say, a cordwainer or a spectacle-maker instead of a

publishers' clerk, he would undoubtedly have been a "Worthy." As it was, his appearance commanded at the least dismayed respect. It suggested a formidable combination of the undertaker and the family solicitor. Only his ravaged "chimney pot" proclaimed him what he was. "Ole Bandy hoff to dinner," would say young Jeeves the office-boy. "A pound o' starch an' arf a pint o' vinegar. Oh, cripes!" But for all that his soul was secretly reproved.

Few who might mark Old Coote as on this winter's afternoon he tripped precisely along Chiswick Mall—might mark Old Coote and guess, despite his unimpassioned gaze, his self-revering carriage, his close and buttoned dignity, that he was feeling worried. Yet the thing was true. He was worried, and by no more than a chance gibe, the fatuous witticism of an underling.

The incident had been trivial enough. Someone—a lady—had called to see one of the partners of the firm. Griggson, whose job it was to interpose a honeyed obduracy between his masters and alluring importunity, happened to be upstairs just then. Selway was checking in the stock-room. To Old Coote had fallen the unappreciated felicity of interviewing the fair stranger. After perhaps a couple of minutes she had left, saying that she would call again when Mr. Briggs might chance to be less busy. Old Coote had thought no more about the matter till, reaching within the lobby for his hat and coat, he overheard young Bashford's pleasantry: "Ah, yes,

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my boy, it wouldn't have done for you or me to interview the little lady—no telling what we might get up to, eh? That's why old Image gets the job—they know he's safe. . . .” And then a giggle.

No more than that, and yet, somehow, the thing had stung. . . .

II

He strode eastwards along the Mall, more briskly, for his blood had chilled in idle sauntering. Already at this early hour of afternoon the light was failing. The murky sun behind him cast no shadow.

He reached the end of the stone-paved promenade and then retraced his steps. A barrel-organ had stationed itself beside his path so that presently he would have to pass it. It was playing something which he vaguely knew. What was it? Ah, yes, of course, a tune the clerks were always whistling nowadays. Some jerky, modern thing. He sniffed contemptuously.

Many years ago he too had whistled tunes. He could remember singing “Ta ra ra boom de ay” with Tommy Bowles as echo all the way down Ludgate Hill. That, of course, was before he became an “Institution.” Emma, his sister, had been a slender girl of twenty. Young Bowles, until some dazzling star of Vaudeville had singed his wings, had been rather partial to her society. They had all three used to meet after office-hours and wander down Cheapside towards the “Postman’s Knock,” where

they had recklessly regaled themselves on port—threepence the dock glass.

Earlier still and vaguer were days of "Champagne Charlie," of macaronis dashing down the Strand in hansom cabs, of temerarious little scavenger-boys darting precariously amongst the horses' feet around St. Paul's Churchyard, sweeping up chaff miraculously to garner it in bins. . . .

He arrived opposite the barrel-organ. A frowning, dark-browed woman turned its handle, but between the shafts there stood a girl holding a cap outstretched for coppers. Old Coote hesitated, stopped, then placed a penny in the cap. The girl smiled back her thanks. She had a flower-like face—pale cheeks, dark eyes.

Presently the organ disappeared. It was time Old Coote should turn his steps towards home. Yet still he lingered by the parapet.

The children who had been playing on the muddy shore had gone. The Mall itself was quite deserted. Over upon the Eyot the sallow grasses were already tipped with frost. Hardly a sound, a breath, to break the trance-like stillness of winter afternoon. . . .

It was then, just as he took a last glance up the mist-hung river, that Old Coote saw the bottle.

At first, indeed, it was not recognisably a bottle. It was just a faintly glinting speck of orange light that crept erratically along the margin of the stream. It was moving very slowly, for the tide was nearly at slack water.

Old Coote would have been quite unable to explain

what there was in this bobbing, shining object that attracted him. He was already cold through dawdling by the water on a December afternoon. He would be soundly rated by Emma if he were late for tea. Every consideration should have urged him to hurry on his way.

And yet the dancing speck of light intrigued him to the point of descending to the shore to meet it. There were some steps close to the place where he had stood and it was quite easy to get down.

When he drew level with it the bottle was five yards from the shore. Its character at that distance was obvious enough. A rather large, square-necked bottle—a medicine bottle probably. Old Coote's curiosity should have been amply satisfied.

But, having come so far, he might as well go farther. He waited for the bottle to be washed ashore. He kept pace with it as inch by inch, with tantalising inward sweeps and slow gyrations, it drifted eastwards on the last of the ebb tide.

If he had had a stick he might have reached the thing by this. It would look silly now to throw a stone if anyone should see him from the Mall. He could remember throwing stones at bottles as a boy—one day at Margate it had been. Long ago, that, however. . . .

It was at this point that Old Coote first realised his anxiety to retrieve the bottle—realised it and wondered at it with the onset of a slow misgiving. What was he after, anyway? A vague, momentous sense of imminence oppressed his mind. He would go

back. . . . No, he would not go back, could not go back.

A few yards east of where he stood a tiny spit of muddy shingle ran outwards from the shore. He would get on that and wait. If he did not capture the bottle then, the thing was hopeless.

He stepped out gingerly upon the little promontory. He bent, and stretched a hand. . . .

Very slowly it was coming to him. There were other objects also drifting with the tide to bear it company, objects at sight of which Old Coote experienced a shudder of repugnance. He thought of the children who had been playing on the shore below the parapet. . . .

Now he had all but grasped it—*had* grasped it. No, it was going to evade him. His fingers just closed about its neck, lost it, then closed again. The thing was his.

He straightened himself, panting. He felt suddenly foolish and ashamed. Supposing anyone had watched him all this time? But the shore was still deserted. The frosty fog that rolled upon the western stream was stained a murky carmine by the setting sun. Along the streets the lamps were being lit.

It was under a lamp that Old Coote drew forth the bottle he had hidden in his coat and read the message it contained. He had known, somehow, that there would be a message almost before he took it from the water. To extract the folded slip of paper it had been necessary to break the bottle's neck

against his boot. With a curious pang of apprehension he had begun to read the scribbled words. . . .

III

He lay awake that night, the note between his hand's palm and the pillow. Through weary hours its sentences re-echoed in his brain.

An appeal for help—scrawled, as it seemed, in frantic haste on a half-sheet of notepaper. A woman's writing and the paper a pale blue, daintily feminine—the sort they liked to use. No date, no signature, but an address—somewhere near Kew he judged it. And, at the end, as by a desperate afterthought, entreaty—not the police! “For God's sake not the police!”

This was the message carried to him by the tide—to him, the worn-out clerk, the stick, the dry-as-dust, to him whose sparkless soul rendered him “safe” where other men were dangerous. . . .

A hoax perhaps? Old Coote had heard of such. People put notes in bottles for a lark and chucked 'em in the river. There was a case the other day.

But this was not a hoax—he knew it, felt it in his bones.

“Er,” said Old Coote, “I'll give it the police.”

He should, of course, have done that yesterday, but something curiously had restrained him. Instead he had returned white-faced and worried to his home. Emma had remarked on his appearance, had asked him why he was so late. He had replied evasively,

the while he wondered whether to confide in her. Again, something had sealed his lips.

Under his pillow he could feel the paper. Its edges, where they had uncurled against the bottle's sides, were stained. Medicine—the stuff had smelt.

Disturbing visions crowded on his brain. He pictured her alone up there, this woman—some house along the river it must be. He pictured her ill-treated, starved, afraid—tortured perhaps, imprisoned, anything. Terrible wrong was being done and he was powerless to aid.

Yet he must act, and act at once, or else——

"None o' my business, anyhow," said Coote. "I'll give it the police."

If it had been a younger man than he—a younger man and different. Young Bashford, now. He wondered what young Bashford would have done if he had found the note. Some fool trick, he supposed. Gone to the house perhaps and made a scene. An ugly scene and then, no doubt, the sack. The sack was all the thanks you got for meddling. . . .

The night was soundless, very still. In the adjoining room he could hear Emma's steady breathing. He wondered with a moment's faint amusement what she would say if she found out, found out that scrap of paper pressed above his palm—that tragic, perilous thing.

There was no doubt what Emma would have done if she had found it. Common sense, that was Emma, common sense and no nonsense. He realised suddenly how much he owed to Emma, she who had

scraped and planned, contrived and saved. . . . Yes, he had much to thank her for, and yet . . . Somehow he would have been a different man by now if she had not been there. Not like young Bashford, no, but different. . . . More to look back on as it were. What was the phrase? "Wild oats," yes, that was it.

He pulled himself up with a start. What was he dreaming about? What had come over him? Old fool! A week ago the thing would not have worried him like this. A week ago? two days, one day ago! Ah, then it was young Bashford's gibe? Ridiculous! As if he cared what boys like Bashford said! Romance perhaps?—Some faint, belated stirring of the blood. . . . No, no. Romance was not for him.

Outside the moon had risen. Old Coote crept quietly from out his bed, tiptoed across the room, partly drew back the blind, looked out upon the night. Silvery in the distance he could catch a glimpse of the river above Richmond Bridge.

IV

The house, when he had found it on the following morning, was not the sort of house to harbour crime or cover tragedy. It was a pleasant, rambling place of tiles and rough-cast with green shutters and well-kept grounds extending to the river's edge.

Old Coote's heart was beating. He had set out after breakfast, pacifying Emma with the story of a headache and the need of exercise. The church bells

were sounding as he had made his way along the neat suburban streets. Rustling groups of people in their Sunday best had seemed to eye him curiously. After ten minutes' unsuccessful search he had had to ask a policeman for the way to Ringmer Park. He was a great, contemptuous-looking giant, standing, as it had chanced, beneath the purple lamp of the police-station. "I'll just have a look round and see the place," said Coote. "And then come back and give it him. I'll say I saw it on the bank."

And now he had found the house. It had come upon him suddenly, before he had expected it. He had read the name, white-lettered, on the gate and felt a paralysing pang of fear. What was he doing here? Why had he come? He'd better cut it and go back.

In one of the houses on the other side of the road a window rattled upwards. A woman was staring at him. He couldn't loiter here. . . . People would wonder. Affecting deep preoccupation he began to wander slowly on.

This was the end. He might have known it from the start. What could he do, a feeble, weak old man, a quill-driver? Bashford was right, he hadn't got it in him. What had he gained by acting as he had save to debase himself in his own eyes?

He had arrived opposite a turning from the road—a sort of lane that wound towards the river. Head bowed, absorbed in his humiliation, he wandered down it.

At the bottom he looked up and started. He was

on the bank now. A narrow, pile-faced path led eastwards down the stream, skirting the gardens of the houses he had passed. A moment's hesitation and Old Coote had turned to follow it.

It was very silent when at length he paused beside the hedge, so silent that above the wash and ripple of the river he could hear the painful hammering of his heart. No one was in sight.

The hedge was high, but in the centre it was broken by a gate, a gate which Old Coote noticed with a curious pang was left ajar. Very cautiously he craned his head around its edge and peered.

He was instantly transfixed, rooted to the spot whereon he stood. The garden was deserted; the windows of the house that gave upon it disclosed no hint of life; no footprint marked the frost that glistened on the lawn or on the bevelled gravel of the paths. Only that all-pervading Sunday morning silence had been broken, broken so magically that forgetting where he was and what he did, Old Coote had caught his breath in wonder at that thrilling burst of song.

It was over—ended abruptly as it had begun. A phrase, no more. What was it? Coote could not have told you. A woman's voice—woman's or girl's—pealing and swelling through those sharp and sudden moments. . . .

Where had it come from—this song? He had forgotten all about his errand, had stepped a little forward through the gate, waiting, listening. It had seemed to come from somewhere close to him. In

the garden? Impossible. There was no hiding-place within the garden—no cover there for any sort of nightingale. Unless—he noticed then what had before escaped him—a kind of summer-house, brick-faced, however, almost curtained from the view by a high hedge of privet. And—yes—the place communicated with the house—a sort of passage-way, screened, like the harbour, by a hedge.

Could she be there? He started. Had he dreamed, or had he caught another sound—a smothered sob. . . .

He was inside the gate by now, still waiting. The wintry air was keen, but he did not feel cold. His face was damp with sweat. The pulses surged and throbbed about his temples. Body and mind alike were tense and stiffened in expectancy.

“What are you doing here?”

He swung round, gasping—saw that he was trapped. Filling the space between the hedge and the half-open gate there stood a figure. A figure clothed in grey, loose-fitting tweeds, a figure which, as Old Coote’s eyes travelled despairingly from brogues to gaily patterned socks, from knickerbockers to a knitted woollen vest and to the frowning face above it, became, in spite of its unwonted garb, increasingly and terribly familiar.

“What are you doing here, Mr. Coote?”

Good God, it was the boss himself—his boss, young Mr. Struthers! What devilish ingenuity of fate was this?

Old Coote had backed away until the hedge prickled

his neck. A deadly faintness held him. Instinctively he raised a warding arm.

"You'd better come inside, then we can talk." Mr. Struthers held a golfing iron. Even in his dire agitation and dismay Old Coote could note his fingers playing on its leather grip.

"Come on, we can't stand here." The tones were nervous rather than enraged.

They proceeded up the gravel path towards the house. The man in golfing clothes halted before a door, took out a key, looked round. Was it entirely at Coote he looked, or did that quick, uneasy glance include the hidden summer-house as well?

"Now, Mr. Coote," said Struthers, when they had passed into what seemed to be the dining room, "sit down and tell me what's all this about."

But for some time Old Coote could neither make reply nor sit as he was bid. At length he sank upon a chair and spoke: "Done for myself I have. You needn't tell me that." His hopelessness was abject and complete. For a moment the idea of evasion had indeed occurred to him as they walked together from the gate, but he knew himself too shaken and confused to concoct and carry through a plausible excuse. He would have to show the note.

His master's face was pale, but not with passion. His eyes flickered nervously over the bowed figure of the clerk, but it was in a tone of brisk command that he replied:

"Don't be a fool, man. Pull yourself together. You must be able to explain things. I don't suppose

you came to burgle or to murder anyone. Be quick. I haven't time to waste."

Coote hesitated, then fumbled in his pocket for the note. After he had found it and given it to Mr. Struthers he hid his face despairingly in both his hands.

There was a long silence. Mr. Struthers had moved over to the window to read. Coote, between his fingers, could see the shoulders squared against the light, the bent and rigid head. This man—his master! He could remember him as a friendly, freckled youngster when his father, old Mr. Struthers, was alive. A youngster, and yet now . . . In a numb agony he waited for the blow to fall. Upon the mantelpiece a clock with torturing deliberation struck the hour of twelve.

At last Mr. Struthers turned and said: "How did you come by this?"

Coote could not read his shadowed face, but he was conscious of something that the smoothness of the tones could only half conceal, of some emotion held painfully in leash until he made reply.

"I found it, sir. It was in a bottle washed up by the tide. . . ."

"When?"

"Yesterday evening, sir."

"And you didn't take it to the police. Why not?"

Old Coote made a vague gesture.

"How long had you been here before I came?"

"About two minutes, sir."

"Hah!" With that long-drawn expiration of the breath Mr. Struthers seemed somehow to relax. He moved over to the sideboard. There was the chink of glass.

"And it was your intention to follow up this matter in person, Mr. Coote?"

"Well, sir," said Coote. He stammered and then stopped. How to explain what he would never understand himself?

"It certainly shows you in a somewhat unfamiliar light, distinctly unfamiliar. I wonder that you let me see that note. You ought, of course, first to have stunned and gagged me and then released the lady in distress. Though, as to that, there would have been some difficulties, decided difficulties."

"Er," said Old Coote, "of course, sir, when I saw . . ." Again he stopped. Between his knees his fingers, locked and intertwined, kept up a futile, passionate writhing.

"When you saw that it was me? That's flattering of you, Coote. Of course, I'm your employer, and that makes . . . a difference, doesn't it?"

There was a pause, then Mr. Struthers said:

"Well, Mr. Coote, you have been indiscreet, extremely indiscreet. I hope that this coincidence will bring that home to you. I never should have dreamed that you were so—romantic. Romance, except for gentlemen of independent means, is apt to prove—expensive. However, as it happens, no great harm's been done. And now, perhaps, you'd like to hear the—explanation of that note?"

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Old Coote had lifted an imploring hand. "Oh, no, sir. Please . . ."

"I'll tell you," continued Mr. Struthers magnanimously. "Tell you to show you you've been tilting at a windmill. This note was written by my little girl, my daughter. A silly prank, for which she shall be punished. Fifteen years old. I gave her credit for more sense. It's just as well you didn't give it to the police."

There was another pause, then Mr. Struthers said: "Of course, you understand, you're not to mention this to anyone. The story's much too silly. You understand—not to a soul."

Old Coote stood up.

"Then, sir," he said, "you're going to . . . to keep me on? You don't intend to . . ."

"To sack you? No, I don't see the necessity. As long as you remain discreet. There's been no personal affront. You couldn't know that this was my address—we've only just moved in. And now, good-morning. Yes, I'll keep the note. . . . Good-morning, Coote."

The front door closed. The interview was over. Old Coote was out again upon the road. The people coming home from church, the policeman towering beneath his lamp, eyed him with bleak disfavour as, dazed and numb, he shambled on his way.

V

It was a foggy Friday afternoon. In Briggs and Struthers' counting-house, beside a green-shaded electric light, Old Coote stood stiffly at his task.

Nearly two months had sped since he had found the note within the bottle, two months, of which each quickly passing day had rendered that adventure more remote, more visionary.

Mr. Struthers, on the few occasions which had found them alone together, had made no reference to the incident. The only outward thing, indeed, that served as a reminder to Old Coote was handed to him from the cashier's desk each week. His salary had been raised three pounds a month.

But, this apart, his pride had been too deeply stung to let him easily forget. He, the exemplar, the Institution, to have lapsed into such folly, and now, apparently, to be paid for it as well!

It was, indeed, over this question of his increased salary that he was meditating on this Friday afternoon. He was feeling old and worried. The day, now dragging to its close, had been unusually slack. His work had been too light to occupy his mind. Well, presently he would be free. Journeying home upon the 'bus-top he could think things out. . . .

Suddenly Old Coote looked up. Something was happening around him. At one end of the long room the door had just been opened. Through it, for a moment, he could catch the sounds of other doors—opening and closing in a stealthy haste—of

someone's hurrying footfall, of someone's distant cough. The door had closed again. Stelthwaite, the show-room clerk, had just come in. He wore an air of exaggerated unconcern.

The other clerks had caught it by this time. Not an eye but was staring covertly as Stelthwaite approached old Selway's desk. What had he got? Of course, the evening paper. They could see him as he held it out to Selway and laid a pointing finger on the page—could see his pallid smirk.

Six o'clock. Ledgers were closed and put away in a subdued flutter of excitement. Hardly a second later and then, miraculously, everybody knew—details were being canvassed.

It was with Charlie Scrimp that Old Coote travelled homewards on the 'bus-top. He would have preferred to be alone, but Charlie, whose home lay close to his, was eager to discuss the news.

"Well," he was chattering, "if this don't bust the firm! Talk about scandal! Why, a firm like us lives on its bloomin' reputation. Think of all the col-porteurs and Societies an' things! An' then to have one o' the partners' wives—that's not quite right—the wife o' one o' the blessed partners—drowning herself in the river with suspicion of cruelty on top of it. You see, Mr. Coote, it makes no difference that she was a drug-taker and half-mad—unfortunately for Struthers it makes no difference at all—it's how the thing *sounds*. People don't stop to inquire into details. . . . Oh, yes, it's all come out now, half a column of it. 'Course they have to be jolly careful

TIDE-BORNE

what they *print*; they don't actually *say* much, but it's easy to see what it means. 'Marks of violence.' My Aunt! . . . Got so bad he had to shut her up—or pretty much like that—escaped twice before and brought back by the police. Had been a singer. 'M. Awful thing for Struthers. I wonder if he *was* cruel to her. Why, Mr. Coote, what's up? You're looking awfully queer. Going to get down here? I thought you usually went farther.'"

By Chiswick Mall the wind blew down the ebbing tide. Reflected in the sullen surface of the river Old Coote could see the stars, twinkling and dancing, a myriad tingling points of fire. But it was not of the stars, nor of the hurrying river, nor of that message it had borne to him that he was thinking. Beneath the mounting flood of shame and self-contempt, frustration and defeat, his mind achieved its last perversity. Strangely enough he was thinking of the girl who had held out her cap to him for pennies—the girl whose face was like an open flower.

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"GOOD-BYE, Storie, old girl—here, you've forgotten your suit-case—what a brain! Oh, yes, you had; don't be pig-headed, dear. I'll put it up for you. There, I must leap, you're just off. Don't forget to write. . . . Good-bye!"

Esthore, her handkerchief awave, kept her head out of the window a full minute as the train jolted from the station. Her usually pale cheeks were faintly flushed. She experienced a rare moment of childish pleasure. Over her face there broke at length an incredulous and flickering smile. She thought: "How jolly to be off at last! How splendid! To be going to see Derek and his wife again, and their delicious crew of podgy youngsters, her nephews and her nieces. How——"

And then, suddenly, her happiness had crumbled, and something, swift and savage as an actual blow, had wiped that faltering smile from her lips.

She had withdrawn her head from the window, sat down, loosened her wraps a trifle, raised her eyes.

In the corner farthest from her own was seated an old lady, a slender, silver-haired old lady in a veil and bonnet and black sealskin coat.

"Wonnicott!"

For several seconds Esthore thought she must have screamed that one disastrous word aloud. She sat, grey-faced and huddled. One hand had flown instinctively to still the violent beating of her heart; the other pressed her handkerchief against her mouth.

The old lady removed her gloves, closed the door

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of the corridor from which she had just entered, set a heavy leather travelling-case against it, pulled up her veil, adjusted pince-nez. Presently she took up a magazine, put it down again, fidgeted, glanced up finally and spoke.

"You're not very well," she said. "Excuse me. Dear me, you're terribly white. You must take some brandy. How fortunate I always carry some with me."

Yes—Wonnecott! The same voice, the same clipped, meticulous accent, even, as she rummaged for the brandy, the same little, rapid, bird-like movements.

Esthore had dropped her hands. A swift, fantastic fear, which was already half a hope, had flashed across her brain. Old Mrs. Wonnecott was going to poison her!

The brandy came, smelling curiously of leather from the little case which had contained the medicine-glass. Their fingers touched an instant.

"Thank you," Esthore found strength to murmur. "Thank you . . . my heart. . . ."

Mrs. Wonnecott nodded sympathetically. "I know," she said, "I know." Her fingers were busy unpinning the girl's hat, which she removed and laid upon the seat. Presently Esthore could feel them, cool and capable, about her throat as they unloosed the collar of her coat. A folded shawl was placed behind her neck for pillow. After a moment's survey the old lady retired to her corner.

Under the influence of the brandy Esthore began

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slowly to revive. She experienced a fugitive relief. At Frensham, the next stop, she would get out and wait for the next train. She would send a wire to Derek. . . .

But the next minute her heart gave a drop of sick misgiving. Her suit-case! By slightly twisting her head she could just glimpse it in the rack above her where Ellen Dunn, her friend, had placed it. Out of the corner of her eye she could distinguish its yellow tie-on label dangling from the strap. Sooner or later those other eyes would rest upon that label and would read her name. And then——

As the train slid through the pleasant country-side the nightmare which had lain grey about her early girlhood and had faded only with the slowly passing years pounced out on her again.

With stark distinctness she could see a glistening beach, a downward-trending sun, a scutter of white sea-fowl on the cliff; could hear the hurried thunder of a rising tide, the steady drumming of an evening breeze.

She had been staying with her schoolfellows, the Flemings, in a little Cornish village by the sea. Only four hours of her three weeks' holiday remained, and, while her friends had driven to the station with her trunks, she had come out to satisfy her whim and bathe for the last time alone.

She had swum far, and the afternoon had been love-blue, dappled with gold. A great gull had screamed above her head, its wings on fire.

Rosy and glowing from her swim she had raced a

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breaker up the shining beach. It had been very good to be alive.

And then, as she was dressing in the shelter of a rock, she had heard the pad of feet upon the sand and looking up had gazed into a leering face.

"Loonie Leonard"—she could see him now, the Wonnicott boy, that ambling, smiling creature, for ever pounding foolishly along the sands with spade and bucket, or lurking behind breakwater and cliff to spring out suddenly with horrid and exultant cries.

Esthore and her friends had been three times to tea at Mrs. Wonnicott's. The boy, on each occasion, had been there, shambling about with scones and buttered toast, chuckling to himself behind the door, dodging grotesquely round an oriental screen. He was fifteen, but a moustache pricked dark upon his upper lip. Finally his mother had banished him to dig in a small pit of sand behind the house.

And then, one morning, they had all met upon the beach, and when he saw Esthore the lad had danced for joy, had filled her lap with weed and pebbles, had seized her hand and fawned. . . . She had drawn back dismayed, but Mrs. Wonnicott had gently said: "He means no harm. We must be kind to him, poor fellow," and, penitent though still terrified, the girl had let her finger-tips remain within his eager clasp.

"Are you better now?" The old lady's quiet voice roused Esthore with a start. She looked into the lined but placid countenance and for an instant their eyes met, but then her own gaze shrank. "Yes,

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thank you, better." Her head was burning, but her hands and feet were ice. She must be looking very ill.

This woman's son! She had backed away in terror from the face that leered at her around the rock. Behind her a rough path rose winding up the cliff. Snatching up such clothes as she could grasp, she had run along this path until she reached a sort of stony platform that overhung the sea.

He had followed her, panting and grimacing, had caught her and tried to kiss her. She knew then his prodigious strength and realised that to struggle would be hopeless. Yet like a trapped bird she had beat and fluttered, saving her cheeks and lips. Half fainting she had marked his hot, exultant face and read the confident hunger in his eyes.

Then, suddenly, she had managed to start from him and pointed out to sea. "Look!" she had shouted, "look!" For a moment he had turned—he had been tricked so easily—and she had summoned all her strength to push.

God help her—there was nothing for it—she had pushed—that wretched, ambling creature, sporting about the sand so full of japes and pranks, that cumbersome and precocious body so intent a second since upon its primitive designs, that witless mind, knowing its own inscrutable delights and fears, that mind so easily intrigued, cajoled, betrayed; God help her, she had pushed.

She had run down then to the cliff-foot and for some minutes searched in vain. The tide was rising rapidly and she had presently been forced to race along

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the narrowing beach to save herself. On a broader patch of shingle she found space to dress. She had little more than her blouse and skirt; her other clothes, which in her panic she had forgotten till too late, lay cut off by the tide. For an agonising hour she had wandered half distraught about the shore. There was an old, forsaken boat hauled high and dry beneath the cliff, and until the dusk began to fall she had crouched at intervals behind it, praying to heaven for strength to raise a cry and call for help. That strength had been denied her. Her spirit quailed before the thought of curious and accusing eyes. . . . She knew herself too faint and spent to act a part and hide her guilt. Girl as she was, how could she bring herself to tell the thing that she had done; worse still, how utter its excuse? The moments passed.

Then, with the fading of the light, had come remembrance of the train she was to catch. It had been arranged that after her bathe she should return for a last tea with Mrs. Fleming and then hurry to the station, where her friends, after their shopping, would be waiting to see her off. At the Junction, ten miles distant, her guardian would meet her. They were to stop at an hotel there for the night and early the next morning would join the eight o'clock express for home.

Barelegged and hatless, she ran along the lonely mile of flinty road and from the evening horror of the shore. The train was entering the station as she reached it. Her friends had seen her coming and had got her ticket. No time, thank God, for lengthy

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explanation or farewell. Only just time to tell them of her race against the tide, to see her trunks placed safely in the train, to snatch at somebody's great-coat and then to gain her seat. In the hotel that night she had lain tossing wide awake upon her bed and listened shuddering to a great chime of bells that crashed and jangled every quarter-hour in the steeple of a church across the road. All the next day, within the train, the thunderous menace of their ringing still pursued her, but, by the time her guardian and she had reached their journey's end, exhaustion had its way and she had slept. For many days, with intervals of feverish semi-wakefulness, with moments here and there of stark and horrid dread, her uneasy sleep continued. Her illness saved her reason.

She had been sixteen then. She was now thirty-one. For fifteen years the terror of that evening by the sea had dwelt with her, shadowing her days, vitiating all her joys, gnawing, sapping, invading even casual and shallow moments with haunting stabs of fear. It had made of her a nervous, sickly woman.

After her illness she opened a letter from the Flemings. White-faced, she skimmed its pages. "So sorry you are ill . . . no wonder, running all that way then sitting in the train with next to nothing on. . . . Such excitement! What do you think? We are off to India next month. We got a cable from Daddy two days after you left. . . . Send you some curios. . . . Promise me to keep up writing. . . ." At the end she came on what she sought and dreaded. A postscript ran crosswise along the margin of the

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last page. "Of course you heard from Joyce about the Wonniccotts. Poor Mrs. Wonniccott, we feel so sorry for her."

No other echo of the tragedy had disturbed Esthore. For a month or more she had waited in sick apprehension for the blow that never fell. It could not be that she was not suspected—her clothes upon the cliff perhaps, or else the story of her half-naked run to catch the train. That Mrs. Wonniccott had not pursued the matter was not difficult to understand. Her silence was more terrible than any outcry of reproaches could have been.

Joyce Fleming's letter was either never posted or had somehow failed to reach her. No need for her to wonder what its news had been. She was sent six months later to another school at Buxton. New sounds and sights, new faces, thronged her days. Her correspondence with the Flemings out in India lapsed gradually and died. Then and thereafter there was not an outward thing that could remind her of what had happened on those far-off Cornish sands. Nothing until this moment when the screening veil of years had suddenly been rent, the past in all its grisly horror sprung to life.

In her extremity she sat, despairing and undone. Her lips were parted, but she scarcely seemed to breathe. Only her eyes moved restlessly in her set face, imploring succour. The train sped onwards. Moments passed. Presently Mrs. Wonniccott looked up at her. "I do hope you're feeling better," she said. "These heart-attacks are so distressing. Have you far to go?"

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"To Frensham."

"Frensham? It's quite close now. I have to change there. I can look after you a little while if no one's meeting you. I'll get your things down ready."

It had come at last! There would be no escape. Her name upon the label would be read. She could not hope that it would be unrecognised. Already Mrs. Wonnicott had risen and was reaching upwards to the rack. Hours seemed to pass. The train began to slacken speed. A house or two flashed by. And now a new and terrifying impulse took possession of Esthore, an impulse stronger than the weakness of her fear—the impulse to confess. She knew then, though for a time she strove against that knowledge, that her opportunity was here, her single chance of happiness, deliverance through many a year to come; that to escape this moment and the trial of this moment would be to lose for ever hope of peace, to go for ever haunted and afraid. . . . A voice rang dinning in her ears: "Confess. Confess. Before she reads the name, confess!"

She rose, tottering, and laid a hand on the old lady's arm. She gathered all her strength, striving in vain to speak. Her brain swam. For an instant their eyes met. Then all was lost to her in a great whelm of blackness.

"Good gracious," exclaimed Mrs. Wonnicott. "She's fainted!"

At Frensham Esthore, still unconscious, was laid upon a settee in the waiting room. A kindly country girl relieved Mrs. Wonnicott of her responsibility.

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"Though really," said the latter as at length she hurried off, "I wish I could have stayed. Poor thing.—Ah, there you are! Good-morning, Emily."

Into the waiting-room had walked an elderly, sour-visaged woman and by her side a loutish, lumbering figure in a blazer and a gaily coloured cricket cap.

"Look there, Len," said Mrs. Wonnecott, when she had embraced him; "she fainted in the train, poor girl. Eh?—Now, don't pretend not to understand. You understand quite well."

His gaze rested upon the white and upturned face and on his own appeared a sudden frown and then a look of terror. His mother bustled off to buy a magazine. Vague, distant memories assailed his mind. Plucking with one hand at his nurse's sleeve he pointed with the other to Esthore and gurgled.

But Emily knew her charge too well to feel concern or even interest. She had been Loonie Leonard's nurse ever since his fall from off the cliffs, of which Joyce Fleming's letter should have told Esthore. Miraculously wedged between two rocks, he had been found next day, sustaining injuries which would have killed an ordinary boy outright. As long as she could remember he had been curiously afraid of girls and women of his age.

Presently, however, the terror left his face and he began to smile. He sneezed twice, looked amazed at having sneezed, made a roguish gesture, then, chuckling, ran out upon the platform.

By the time Esthore recovered consciousness he was out of sight.

THE SISTER SPEAKS

THE ball of knitting fell with a sudden flump from Hilda's lap, and her head gave an upward jerk. She looked round at the other two with an apologetic smile, for it was evident she had been dozing.

"It's so dark," she explained in self-defence, "and both of you there as quiet as mice. That's enough to make anybody sleepy."

"We'll have the lamp directly, dear," replied her sister, Joan, from the gloom. "Don't try to knit, you'll strain your eyes."

Silence for a minute, and then the third woman spoke. It was the strained composure of her voice, the horrible casual brightness of her manner that hurt Joan again as it had been hurting her all day.

All Allie said was: "Hilda, child, I meant to give you this long ago. It's a photo of Arnold—I don't think you've got one—not like this. He's in flannels. It must have been taken at Wenderley."

Hilda found herself mumbling thanks, conscious all the while of Joan's anxious eyes and ears devouring her. A second later Allie had come over and was kissing her. Her kisses seemed to burn like fire. Hilda wanted to tell her not to do it. She would have to scream out to them directly that she couldn't stand it, she couldn't stand it.

She found herself speaking to Allie in that queer, dangerous tone that sometimes came upon her un-awares so that she herself was surprised and almost frightened.

"I have one already, just like this, Allie. Only

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it's signed. He gave it to me himself. I remember his writing on it."

Allie began to say something in reply, but stopped, with Joan's eyes upon her. She retired to the sofa and Hilda was left with the photo in her hand. Allie remarked presently that it was too dark to see it properly; but there was no hurry; it'd do later when the lamp came in . . . blind man's holiday.

It was so evident that she had been going to say something else, that her remarks about the light were a tactful substitution. Hilda hated her for her tact and self-possession. That woman—Arnold's widow!

There was a brief pause and then they all three began to talk together, hurriedly, chaotically, catching desperately at the veriest straws of topics. It was as if they had realised of a sudden that with the imminent coming of the lamp this dreaded day would be nearly over, the seventh horrible day they had spent thus together, the anniversary of Arnold's death. The first reference to him of whom they had been thinking all that time had been made at last, the terrible strain was over, deliverance was at hand.

Even while she was talking, Hilda was running over all that had happened since eight o'clock when first she woke and faced the day. How Allie had eaten all her breakfast to please Joan, though you could see her choking over it. How Allie let you see each separate pang as it came along and wrung her. How Allie's Loss had been stressed and underlined at every point by that terrible calm bravery of hers. How, in

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a word, Allie had piled fortitude upon resigned widowhood and tact upon self-effacement until towards the evening things had well-nigh reached the shrieking point.

In the midst of these thoughts Hilda realised that silence had set in again. They had all ceased to talk.

She looked at the ball of knitting where it lay under the table, barely distinguishable from the pattern of the carpet. For a moment, ridiculously, it filled her consciousness, and she made a half motion to pick it up. Then, in the midst of her movement, with her back bent and her hand stretched out, she stopped. The great resolve had come to her again. This time she would be worthy of it. She found herself thinking: "How futile to bother about a ball of wool when at last I'm going to tell them, when I'm going to tell Allie. . . ."

She straightened herself and looked at them. The two figures were strangely still. Hilda turned slightly in her chair, so as to face Allie, and began to speak.

"Listen, you two," she said in a voice to which she herself was able to attend with a queer detachment. "I've got something to tell you, something I want to say—before the lamp comes in——"

She stopped there and shook her head impatiently as though she had confessed a weakness of which her critical, listening self had disapproved.

"Not that the old lamp would make any difference," she assured them. "I should go on just the same. I should go on because—I can't bear it any

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more. Do you see, Joan and Allie? I just can't bear it any more."

It was too dark to see anything but the vague outline of Allie's face, yet Hilda could imagine how it must be looking. Presently that face was going to writhe. . . .

"I'm going to begin at the beginning, and Joey mustn't mind if it seems like—like giving her away. Anyhow, I can't help it. I can't keep it up, you know, not any longer.

"Allie, can you remember when Joey came to you after Arnold died? About a month after, it was. You'd never met any of his people before, and by that time Joey and I were the only ones left. Father'd died in September and Don two years before that. They hated you, Allie, though they'd never seen you. Anyhow, Joey came to help you look through Arnold's things—I wouldn't have done it, you know, but Joey did. She thought there was no sense in going on being enemies. . . ."

The figure of the widow on the sofa remained very rigid. Joan, nearer the window, with the twilight just sketching out her face against the darkness of the heavy curtains, scarcely seemed to breathe. Their portentous silence was rather disconcerting, Hilda thought, but a second later their stark intentness flattered her. At last she was doing what she had so often dreamed of doing. The situation was hers—her slow voice dropping its deadly syllables one by one into the well of stillness with that queer effect of detachment and aloofness was the only thing that

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mattered. She found herself nodding at them, almost brightly, and continued with a certain grim playfulness—conversationally.

“Joey was looking over Arnold’s things when she found a book. You know, Allie, the little blue-bound book I gave him. You were there when she found it and you wanted to know all about it and about me, because you hadn’t seen it before. I’d written his name in it, and mine too, with the date; but that was quite all right when Joey told you I was his little sister. Quite all right.

“You found a note a little while afterwards in the same drawer, but there was nothing in it that a little sister mightn’t write. . . . I’d been Arnold’s little sister for so long, Allie—years and years before you knew him.

“And all that time, Allie, while you were reading the note and looking at the book, Joey here was scared to death for me . . . and Arnold. Do you hear? It’s coming now, Allie. . . . I can’t see your face, but I know you’re listening, aren’t you? Listening hard. I think you must have suspected now and then for a very long time. I wonder is that why you come to us each year like this when you can see, surely you can see, we hate it. And now you’re going to know. . . . It was funny for Joey to be so scared like that if everything had been really quite all right. . . . Wasn’t it?

“After you were out of the room Joey found other letters. Not letters a little sister would write to Arnold, however long she’d known him. But you

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never saw them, and Joey burnt them. She was awfully frightened. You see, she hadn't known before that I'd been writing to Arnold after he married you. She'd never dreamed . . . I was such a quiet little thing."

Hilda was pausing now to laugh softly. She marvelled at the steady ease with which her tongue could stab and stab. . . . Never had she done anything so supremely well as this. She continued, the corners of her small mouth tilted slightly to the faintest of faint smiles, her hands crossed negligently over the knitting on her lap, only her eyes eager and devouring.

"Of course, you see what I mean, don't you? I was never Arnold's sister at all; that was just a name. We were brought up together, that was all. No one outside ourselves ever knew I wasn't really his sister or that I'd been engaged to him for two years before ever he met you. For two years!

"You'd like to hear about those two years, Allie, wouldn't you? Say you would! There's such lots to tell! Or you'd rather just imagine it? Joey, can you see Allie's face? I can't properly. . . . Fancy my having two whole years of Arnold to hurt Allie with—and more! Isn't it—isn't it *rare*!"

She talked on without waiting for reply from the two stony figures that listened. Somehow her utterance fled out before her as an independent thing to which she with them attended rapt and wondering. Presently her words began to race. She was reaching now those intimate things which even to herself she had hardly clothed in words. The fine pain of what

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she said was clutching at her voice and burning in her eyes.

"Did Allie remember how he looked in the moonlight? Her dear boy, her dear boy, with his eyes all shadowy and the wind blowing in his hair. Little Hilda had had him like that often and often . . . oh, many times. . . ."

"I met him, Allie, just a few weeks before the end. He never cared for you, and he loved me, but that was all. I want you to understand that. There was no wrong done but what you forced upon his heart in marrying him. You knew, you must have known, it was just infatuation and was bound to pass. . . ."

And so on, seemingly for ages, whilst still the lamp tarried and the two listeners sat rigid in the darkness. After a time the voice of Hilda began to weary, and the Hilda also who had been drinking in its cadences with such passionate approval felt the first oncomings of misgiving. She still had much to tell these two. There was her deadly grievance against Allie for her annual visit on the anniversary. She wanted also to recount that scene by Arnold's grave-side—the first time she had met Allie that was. Allie had stolen upon her putting lilies—or was it chrysanthemums?—on the grave, and had asked her who she was. Now Hilda wanted to make plain to Allie how near she had been to telling her the truth.

More and more she was wavering in the telling of her tale. A wind was rising outside, and its sighing in the bushes by the window began to vex the background of her consciousness. It was quite dark now

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too, and still Joan and Allie had made no sound or movement. Suddenly their silence and their starkness frightened her. One would surely have expected them to speak!

She groped forward, and, with her body bent downwards, stopped to wonder why she groped. Oh, yes! Her knitting. It had tumbled off her lap and she'd better pick it up. Maud, coming in with the lamp, might tread on it. Noises were arising, and she was annoyed with herself for being unable to distinguish them from the sighing of the wind. . . . Listen! Someone was saying: "Would be better . . . on the brain. Just about . . . this time. . . ." Now *that* wasn't the wind. Why, surely, it was Joan speaking.

Their figures grew upon her out of the gloom, lost their sinister rigidity by degrees, became human, were moving. The wind outside was rattling the panes. Suddenly the door opened and a bright light shone upon her. Maud was entering with the lamp.

"The light at last!" said Allie. "To wake up Hilda! What a nap she's had!"

After the maid had gone the three gentlewomen looked together at the photo of Arnold which Allie had given Hilda.

THE BAD LANDS

It is now perhaps fifteen years ago that Brent Ormerod, seeking the rest and change of scene that should help him to slay the demon neurosis, arrived in Todd towards the close of a mid-October day. A decrepit fly bore him to the one hotel, where his rooms were duly engaged, and it is this vision of himself sitting in the appalling vehicle that makes him think it was October or thereabouts, for he distinctly remembers the determined settling down of the dusk that forced him to drive when he would have preferred to follow his luggage on foot.

He decided immediately that five o'clock was an unsuitable time to arrive in Todd. The atmosphere, as it were, was not receptive. There was a certain repellent quality about the frore autumn air, and something peculiarly shocking in the way in which desultory little winds would spring up in darkening streets to send the fallen leaves scurrying about in hateful, furtive whirlpools.

Dinner, too, at the hotel hardly brought the consolation he had counted on. The meal itself was unexceptionable, and the room cheerful and sufficiently well filled for that time of year, yet one trivial circumstance was enough to send him upstairs with his temper ruffled and his nerves on edge. They had put him to a table with a one-eyed man, and that night the blank eye haunted all his dreams.

But for the first eight or nine days at Todd things went fairly well with him. He took frequent cold baths and regular exercise and made a point of coming

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back to the hotel so physically tired that to get into bed was usually to drop immediately into sleep. He wrote back to his sister, Joan, at Kensington that his nerves were already much improved and that only another fortnight seemed needed to complete the cure. "Altogether a highly satisfactory week."

Those who have been to Todd remember it as a quiet, secretive watering-place, couched watchfully in a fold of a long range of low hills along the Norfolk coast. It has been pronounced "restful" by those in high authority, for time there has a way of passing dreamily as if the days, too, were being blown past like the lazy clouds on the wings of wandering breezes. At the back, the look of the land is somehow strangely forbidding, and it is wiser to keep to the shore and the more neighbouring villages. Salterton, for instance, has been found quite safe and normal.

There are long stretches of sand dunes to the west, and by their side a nine-hole golf-course. Here, at the time of Brent's visit, stood an old and crumbling tower, an enigmatic structure which he found interesting from its sheer futility. Behind it an inexplicable road seemed to lead with great decision most uncomfortably to nowhere. . . . Todd, he thought, was in many ways a nice spot, but he detected in it a tendency to grow on one unpleasantly.

He came to this conclusion at the end of the ninth day, for it was then that he became aware of a peculiar uneasiness, an indescribable *malaise*.

This feeling of disquiet he at first found himself

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quite unable to explain or analyse. His nerves he had thought greatly improved since he had left Kensington, and his general health was good. He decided, however, that perhaps yet more exercise was necessary, and so he walked along the links and the sand dunes to the queer tower and the inexplicable road that lay behind it three times a day instead of twice.

His discomfort rapidly increased. He would become conscious, as he set out for his walk, of a strange sinking at his heart and of a peculiar moral disturbance which was very difficult to describe. These sensations attained their maximum when he had reached his goal upon the dunes, and he suffered then what something seemed to tell him was very near the pangs of spiritual dissolution.

It was on the eleventh day that some faint hint of the meaning of these peculiar symptoms crossed his mind. For the first time he asked himself why it was that of all the many rambles he had taken in Todd since his arrival each one seemed inevitably to bring him to the same place—the yellow sand dunes with the mysterious-looking tower in the background. Something in the bland foolishness of the structure seemed to have magnetised him, and in the unaccountable excitement which the sight of it invariably produced, he had found himself endowing it with almost human characteristics.

With its white nightcap dome and its sides of pale yellow stucco it might seem at one moment to be something extravagantly ridiculous, a figure of fun at which one should laugh and point. Then, as likely

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as not, its character would change a little, and it would take on the abashed and crestfallen look of a jester whose best joke has fallen deadly flat, while finally, perhaps, it would develop with startling rapidity into a jovial old gentleman laughing madly at Ormerod from the middle distance out of infinite funds of merriment.

Now Brent was well aware of the dangers of an obsession such as this, and he immediately resolved to rob the tower of its unwholesome fascination by simply walking straight up to it, past it, and onwards along the road that stretched behind it.

It was on the morning of one of the last October days that he set out from the hotel with this intention in his mind. He reached the dunes at about ten, and plodded with some difficulty across them in the direction of the tower. As he neared it his accustomed sensations became painfully apparent, and presently increased to such a pitch that it was all he could do to continue on his way.

He remembered being struck again with the peculiar character of the winding road that stretched before him into a hazy distance where everything seemed to melt and swim in shadowy vagueness. On his left the gate stood open, to his right the grotesque form of the tower threatened. . . .

Now he had reached it, and its shadow fell straight across his path. He did not halt to examine it, but strode forward through the open gate and entered upon the winding road. At the same moment he was astonished to notice that the painful clutch at his

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heart was immediately lifted, and that with it, too, all the indescribable uneasiness which he had characterised to himself as "moral" had utterly disappeared.

He had walked on for some little distance before another rather remarkable fact struck his attention. The country was no longer vague; rather, it was peculiarly distinct, and he was able to see for long distances over what seemed considerable stretches of park-like land, grey, indeed, in tone and somehow sad with a most poignant melancholy, yet superficially, at least, well cultivated and in some parts richly timbered. He looked behind him to catch a glimpse of Todd and of the sea, but was surprised to find that in that direction the whole landscape was become astonishingly indistinct and shadowy.

It was not long before the mournful aspect of the country about him began so to depress him and work upon his nerves that he debated with himself the advisability of returning at once to the hotel. He found that the ordinary, insignificant things about him were becoming charged with sinister suggestion and that the scenery on all sides was rapidly developing an unpleasant tendency to the *macabre*. Moreover, his watch told him that it was now half-past eleven—and lunch was at one. Almost hastily he turned about and began to descend the winding road.

It was about an hour later that he again reached the tower and saw the familiar dunes stretching once more before him. For some reason or other he seemed to have found the way back much longer and more

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difficult than the outward journey, and it was with a feeling of distinct relief that he actually passed through the gate and set his face towards Todd.

He did not go out again that afternoon, but sat smoking and thinking in the hotel. In the lounge he spoke to a man who sat in a chair beside him.

"What a queer place that is all at the back there behind the dunes!"

His companion's only comment was a somewhat drowsy grunt.

"Behind the tower," pursued Ormerod, "the funny tower at the other end of the links. The most God-forsaken, dismal place you can imagine. And simply miles of it!"

The other, roused to coherence much against his will, turned slowly round.

"Don't know it," he said. "There's a large farm where you say, and the other side of that is a river, and then you come to Harkaby or somewhere."

He closed his eyes and Ormerod was left to ponder the many difficulties of his remarks.

At dinner he found a more sympathetic listener. Mr. Stanton-Boyle had been in Todd a week when Brent arrived, and his sensitive, young-old face with the eager eyes and the quick, nervous contraction of the brows had caught the newcomer's attention from the first. Up to now, indeed, they had only exchanged commonplaces, but to-night each seemed more disposed towards intimacy. Ormerod began.

"I suppose you've walked around the country at the back here a good deal?" he said.

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"No," replied the other. "I never go there now. I went there once or twice and that was enough."

"Why?"

"Oh, it gets on my nerves, that's all. Do you get any golf here? . . ."

The conversation passed to other subjects, and it was not until both were smoking together over liqueur brandies in the lounge that it returned to the same theme. And then they came to a remarkable conclusion.

"The country at the back of this place," said Brent's companion, "is somehow abominable. It ought to be blown up or something. I don't say it was always like that. Last year, for instance, I don't remember noticing it at all. I fancy it may have been depressing enough, but it was not—not abominable. It's gone abominable since then, particularly to the southwest!"

They said good-night after agreeing to compare notes on Todd, S.W., and Ormerod had a most desolating dream wherein he walked up and up into a strange dim country, full of sighs and whisperings and crowding, sombre trees, where hollow breezes blew fitfully, and a queer house set with lofty pine shone out white against a lurid sky. . . .

On the next day he walked again past the tower and through the gate and along the winding road. As he left Todd behind him and began the slow ascent among the hills he became conscious of some strange influence that hung over the country like a brooding spirit. The clearness of the preceding day

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was absent; instead all seemed nebulous and indistinct, and the sad landscape dropped behind and below him in the numb, unreal recession of a dream.

It was about four o'clock, and as he slowly ascended into the mournful tracts the greyness of the late autumn day was deepening into dusk. All the morning, clouds had been gathering in the west, and now the dull ache of the damp sky gave the uneasy sense of impending rain. Here a fitful wind blew the gold flame of a sear leaf athwart the November gloom, and out along the horizon great leaden masses were marching out to sea.

A terrible sense of loneliness fell upon the solitary walker trudging up into the sighing country, and even the sight of scattered habitations, visible here and there among the shadows, seemed only to intensify his feeling of dream and unreality. Everywhere the uplands strained in the moist wind, and the lines of gaunt firs that marched against the horizon gloom pointed ever out to sea. The wan crowding on of the weeping heavens, the settled pack of those leaning firs, and the fitful scurry of the leaves in the chill blast down the lane smote upon his spirit as something unutterably sad and terrible. On his right a skinny blackthorn shot up hard and wiry towards the dull grey sky; there ahead trees in a wood fluttered ragged yellow flags against the dimness.

A human figure appeared before him, and presently he saw that it was a man, apparently a labourer. He carried tools upon his shoulders, and his head was

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bent so that it was only when Ormerod addressed him that he looked up and showed a withered countenance. "What is the name of all this place?" said Brent, with a wide sweep of his arm.

"This," said the labourer, in a voice so thin and tired that it seemed almost like the cold breath of the wind that drove beside them, "is Hayes-in-the-Up. Of course, though, it'll be a mile farther on for you before you get to Fennington." He pointed in the direction from which he had just come, turned his sunken eyes again for a moment upon Ormerod, and then quickly faded down the descending path.

Brent looked after him wondering, but as he swept his gaze about him much of his wonder vanished. All around, the wan country seemed to rock giddily beneath those lowering skies, so heavy with the rain that never fell; all around, the sailing uplands seemed to heave and yearn under the sad tooting of the damp November wind. Oh, he could well imagine that the men of this weary, twilight region would be worn and old before their time, with its sinister stare in their eyes and its haggard gloom abroad in their pinched faces!

Thinking thus, he walked on steadily, and it was not long before certain words of the man he had met rose with uneasy suggestion to the surface of his mind. What, he asked himself, was Fennington? Somehow he did not think that the name stood for another village; rather, the word seemed to connect itself ominously with the dream he had had some little time ago. He shuddered, and had not walked many

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paces farther before he found that his instinct was correct.

Opposite him, across a shallow valley, stood that white house, dimly set in giant pine. Here the winds seemed almost visible as they strove in those lofty trees, and the constant rush by of the weeping sky behind made all the view seem to tear giddily through some unreal, watery medium. A striking resemblance of the pines to palm-trees and a queer effect of light which brought the white façade shaking bright against the sailing cloud-banks gave the whole a strangely exotic look.

Gazing at it across the little valley, Ormerod felt somehow that this, indeed, was the centre and hub of the wicked country, the very kernel and essence of this sad, unwholesome land that he saw flung wide in weariness about him. This abomination was it that magnetised him, that attracted him from afar with fatal fascination, and threatened him with untold disaster. Almost sobbing, he descended his side of the valley and then rose again to meet the house.

Park-like land surrounded the building, and from the smooth turf arose the pines and some clusters of shrubs. Amongst these Ormerod walked carefully till he was suddenly so near that he could look into a small room through its open window whilst he sheltered in a large yew whose dusky skirts swept the ground.

The room seemed strangely bare and deserted. A small table was pushed to one side, and dust lay thick upon it. Nearer Ormerod a chair or two appeared,

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and, opposite, a great, black mantelpiece glowered in much gloom. In the centre of the floor was set the object that seemed to dominate the whole.

This was a large and cumbrous spinning-wheel of forbidding mien. It glistened foully in the dim light, and its many moulded points pricked the air in very awful fashion. Waiting there in the close stillness, the watcher fancied he could see the treadle stir. Quickly, with beating heart, beset by sudden dread, he turned away, retraced his steps among the sheltering shrubs, and descended to the valley bottom.

He climbed up the other side, and was glad to walk rapidly away down the winding path till, on turning his head, it was no longer possible to see the evil house he had just left.

It must have been near six o'clock when, on approaching the gate and tower, weary from his walk and anxious to reach the familiar and reassuring atmosphere of the hotel, he came suddenly upon a man walking through the darkness in the same direction as himself. It was Stanton-Boyle.

Ormerod quickly overtook him and spoke. "You have no idea," he said, "how glad I am to see you. We can walk back together now."

As they strolled to the hotel Brent described his walk, and he saw the other trembling. Presently Stanton-Boyle looked at him earnestly and spoke. "I've been there too," he said, "and I feel just as you do about it. I feel that that place Fennington is the centre of the rottenness. I looked through the window, too, and saw the spinning-wheel and——"

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He stopped suddenly. "No," he went on quietly a moment later, "I won't tell you what else I saw!"

"It ought to be destroyed!" shouted Ormerod. A curious excitement tingled in his blood. His voice was loud, so that people passing them in the street turned and gazed after them. His eyes were very bright. He went on, pulling Stanton-Boyle's arm impressively. "I shall destroy it!" he said. "I shall burn it and I shall most assuredly smash that old spinning-wheel and break off its horrid spiky points!" He had a vague sense of saying curious and unusual things, but this increased rather than moderated his unaccountable elation.

Stanton-Boyle seemed somewhat abnormal too. He seemed to be gliding along the pavement with altogether unexampled smoothness and nobility as he turned his glowing eyes on Brent. "Destroy it!" he said. "Burn it! Before it is too late and it destroys you. Do this and you will be an unutterably brave man!"

When they reached the hotel Ormerod found a telegram awaiting him from Joan. He had not written to her for some time and she had grown anxious and was coming down herself on the following day. He must act quickly, before she came, for her mind in this matter would be unsympathetic. That night as he parted from Stanton-Boyle his eyes blazed in a high resolve. "To-morrow," he said, as he shook the other's hand, "I shall attempt it."

The following morning found the neurotic as good as his word. He carried matches and a tin of oil.

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His usually pale cheeks were flushed and his eyes sparkled strangely. Those who saw him leave the hotel remembered afterwards how his limbs had trembled and his speech halted. Stanton-Boyle, who was to see him off at the tower, reflected these symptoms in a less degree. Both men were observed to set out arm-in-arm engaged in earnest conversation.

At about noon Stanton-Boyle returned. He had walked with Ormerod to the sand dunes, and there left him to continue on his strange mission alone. He had seen him pass the tower, strike the fatal gate in the slanting morning sun, and then dwindle up the winding path till he was no more than an intense, pathetic dot along that way of mystery.

As he returned he was aware of companionship along the street. He looked round and noticed a policeman strolling in much abstraction some fifty yards behind him. Again at the hotel-entrance he turned about. The same figure in blue uniform was visible, admiring the houses opposite from the shade of an adjacent lamp-post. Stanton-Boyle frowned and withdrew to lunch.

At half-past two Joan arrived. She inquired nervously for Ormerod, and was at once addressed by Stanton-Boyle, who had waited for her in the entrance hall as desired by Brent. "Mr. Ormerod," he told her, "is out. He is very sorry. Will you allow me the impropriety of introducing myself? My name is Stanton-Boyle. . . ."

Joan tore open the note which had been left for

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her by Ormerod. She seemed to find the contents unsatisfactory, for she proceeded to catechise Stanton-Boyle upon her brother's health and general habit of life at Todd. Following this she left the hotel hastily after ascertaining the direction from which Ormerod might be expected to return.

Stanton-Boyle waited. The moments passed, heavy, anxious, weighted with the sense of coming trouble. He sat and smoked. Discreet and muffled noises from within the hotel seemed full somehow of uneasy suggestion and foreboding. Outside, the street looked very gloomy in the November darkness. Something, assuredly, would happen directly.

It came, suddenly. A sound of tramping feet and excited cries that grew rapidly in volume and woke strange echoes in the reserved autumnal roads. Presently the tumult lessened abruptly, and only broken, fitful shouts and staccato ejaculations stabbed the silence. Stanton-Boyle jumped to his feet and walked hurriedly to the entrance hall.

Here there were cries and hustlings and presently strong odours and much suppressed excitement. He saw Joan talking very quickly to the manager of the hotel. She seemed to be developing a Point of View, and it was evident that it was not the manager's. For some time the press of people prevented him from discovering the cause of the commotion, but here and there he could make out detached sentences: "Tried to set old Hackney's farm on fire——" "But they'd seen him before and another man too, so——" "Asleep in the barn several times."

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Before long all but the hotel residents had dispersed, and in the centre of the considerable confusion which still remained, it was now possible to see Ormerod supported by two policemen. A third hovered in the background with a large notebook. As Stanton-Boyle gazed, Brent lifted his bowed head so that their eyes met. "I have done it," he said. "I smashed it up. I brought back one of its points in my pocket. . . . Overcoat, left hand . . . as a proof." Having pronounced which words Mr. Ormerod fainted very quietly.

For some time there was much disturbance. The necessary arrangements for the temporary pacification of the Law and of the Hotel had to be carried through, and after that Ormerod had to be got to bed. It was only after the initial excitement had in large measure abated that Stanton-Boyle ventured to discuss the matter over the after-dinner coffee. He had recognised one of the three policemen as the man whom he had noticed in the morning, and had found it well to retire from observation until he and his companions had left the hotel. Now, however, he felt at liberty to explain his theories of the situation to such as chose to listen.

He held forth with peculiar vehemence and with appropriate gestures. He spoke of a new kind of *terre mauvaise*, of strange regions, connected, indeed, with definite geographical limits upon the earth, yet somehow apart from them and beyond them. "The relation," he said, "is rather one of parallelism and correspondence than of actual connection. I honestly

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believe that these regions do exist, and are quite as 'real' in their way as the ordinary world we know. We might say they consist in a special and separated set of stimuli to which only certain minds in certain conditions are able to respond. Such a district seems to be superimposed upon the country to the southwest of this place."

A laugh arose. "You won't get the magistrate to believe that," said someone. "Why, all where you speak of past that gate by the dunes is just old Hackney's farm and nothing else."

"Of course," said another. "It was one of old Hackney's barns he was setting alight, I understand. I was speaking to one of the policemen about it. He said that fellow Ormerod had always been fossicking around there, and had gone to sleep in the barn twice. I expect it's all bad dreams."

A third spoke derisively. "Surely," he said, "you don't really expect us to believe in your Bad Lands. It's like Jack and the Beanstalk."

"All right!" said Stanton-Boyle. "Have it your own way! I know my use of the term 'Bad Lands' may be called incorrect, because it usually means that bit in the States, you know—but that's a detail. I tell you I've run up against things like this before. There was the case of Dolly Wishart, but no, I won't say anything about that—you wouldn't believe it."

The group around looked at him oddly. Suddenly there was a stir, and a man appeared in the doorway. He carried Ormerod's overcoat.

"This may settle the matter," he said. "I heard

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him say he'd put something in the pocket. He said——"

Stanton-Boyle interrupted him excitedly. "Why, yes," he said. "I'd forgotten that. What I was telling you about—the spinning-wheel. It will be interesting to see if——" He stopped and fumbled in the pockets. In another moment he brought out something which he held in his extended hand for all to see.

It was part of the handle of a patent separator—an object familiar enough to any who held even meagre acquaintance with the life of farms, and upon it could still be discerned the branded letters G. P. H.

"George Philip Hackney," interpreted the unbelievers with many smiles.

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I

HE woke up from the dream, panting, dry-lipped, with miserable eyes. As yet he was but half awake, and his mind was still steeped in all the sweet entrancement of the night. He could see a face, vague now and shadowy, yet dear, too, through that glamorous haze of sleep with the terrible dearness of the remote and the illusory.

Before he woke he would try to work back to that place where he had met her, would try to snatch a few moments of queer, shimmering heaven from the hard and worthless day that threatened. Let him get her clear before him again in all the passionate intimacy of dream. Oh, if he could but do it!

It had not been so much her face that had bewitched him. Nothing so definite as a face, perhaps, could make one cry and cry in ecstasy of longing. It was some strange enchantment that vanished in the daylight and could not be recalled. Those dream moments pulsed with a desolating sweetness—poignant, heart-breaking, ineffable.

Yet let him get some poor idea of what she had been like, let him but see her just that once again!

So, feverishly, half awake, he battled, crying to see her just that once again.

A woman with the knowledge of good and evil, who understood him, looking at him calmly with deep, clear eyes. A broad forehead—he thought it serene and noble as a goddess's—and above it, golden-bronze wisps of hair that trembled in the breeze and

light. They had kissed secretly, and some faint suggestion of sweet guilt and a smothered laugh breaking from her lips made a great, hot wave of passion overwhelm him. Something in her smiling, sun-browned face, with those curls of burnished bronze and the wet, alluring scarlet of the mouth, seemed half mocking, half compassionate. Dimly he seemed able to remember whole days of dalliance where she had been kind, viewing his mad desire with an easy tolerance, almost a maternal pity. It was not that he wanted! Anything but that!

He was more than half awake now, and the vision was slipping from him; quickly he became conscious of the details of the furniture of his bedroom, of the unwelcome light streaming in through the windows, of, yes, of someone knocking to rouse him. He sat up.

He dressed absent-mindedly, neglecting such things as the set of his tie and the grooming of his hair. Not that that was unusual. Failing any special stimulus, he was prone to avoid even very slight exertion; it was an ingrained habit now, bred perhaps of a morbid, energy-destroying introspection; perhaps, too, of a real monotony in his life.

People called him a slacker, and his doctor, who visited him once a week, seemed to find him interesting but contemptible. Brisk young men with forceful, clear-cut faces, very modern and very confident, saw worthlessness written all over him. Supersensitive, he felt their reproach, and, pitifully, acquiesced in it. He felt himself degenerate. Little things showed

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which way the mind blew—a general lassitude always enveloping him, premature baldness, and a disposition in his wrists to become suddenly damp and clammy when he walked uphill.

Now as he had his breakfast he answered his sister's remarks with more than his usual preoccupation. The exotic glamour of his dreams still held his mind and still he was thinking, thinking fixedly of the dim, twilight country of the night, and of the strangely smiling face that he had seen. It was, above all, the necessity of expression that tortured him. He was panting under the longing to conserve this experience that had come to him, to perform the first duty of the artistic soul.

Throughout the day it was the same. He used to spend his time partly in long and lonely walks, partly in his work of illustrating magazines. In this latter employment he had gained some considerable success, sufficient, indeed, with a patrimony of a hundred a year to keep his sister and himself quite comfortably in a cottage near the Downs. Now he was sitting, pencil in hand, striving to catch the elusive charm before it vanished.

His sister Amabel came in.

"How goes it, Claudie?" she asked brightly with a sympathetic glance at the bowed figure. He grunted.

"As usual. Here's the last hour's work." He made a motion towards the virgin sheets before him.

Often and often had she seen him sit like this, pursuing shadows, gazing sullenly at the wall or out

of the window, with the paper white and blank upon the board. Then, indeed, he wrestled, but often to no purpose. Excusing him, she would remind herself that the effort of self-expression, when it is sincere, is the hardest, the most strenuous toil in which man can engage. When it is sincere!

They had tea together, and then Claude went alone for a walk along the Downs. Still the face haunted him. With the artist's instinct—or infirmity—he posed the woman of his dreams in the setting of the scenery around him. Just where he was walking, indeed, the view was none too romantic. He was ascending a path leading past an old fever hospital and the corporation waterworks to a stretch of waste land that gave place later to some private gallops, the property of the Lord of the Manor. He was deeply preoccupied, and hardly paid attention to the direction in which he was walking, yet his steps followed one another with the steady, sure succession of one pursuing a well-known course. When, presently, he came to a turning, he took the path to the right without a moment's hesitation.

Now the path became a rough, chalky track that wound gently aslant the sloping side of a rolling down. In the valley below was a sheepfold, tightly packed. Up from it, in the clear air of evening, rose the dreamy, multitudinous tinkle of the bells.

Presently the track ended in a cul-de-sac. The place where it disappeared was a somewhat evil locality, where rank bramble hemmed in a little depression in the down, and flies buzzed heavily

about the lush grass. On a hot afternoon the air would be stifling as the breath of a laundry, and the land would seem to gasp, feverish and impure.

Claude paused and looked curiously about him. "Whatever did I come here for?" he was saying to himself, when, suddenly, something seemed to strike upon his brain. What was it? A momentary loosening of what had once been tense, an instantaneous resolution of what had been obscure. Something like a flash of strangely wakened memory. He turned aside and looked up the path in the direction from which he had come. The figure of the dream woman was becoming plainer in his mind. Yes. But how changed! He gasped. The evanescent glamour of dream had disappeared and left—a woman indeed, and pretty, but a woman with the coarse prettiness of a stained and cheapened soul. It might well have been one of the village girls, of whose debased loves this place was like as not the witness.

Again he gazed around him, and a feeling of nausea overcame him. The obscene little valley, full of gross suggestion, revolted him. He turned his back on it, and walked quickly up the path.

He soon gained the top of the down, and after a moment's hesitation decided to return home by the way he had come. The change from the still oppression of the valley to the fine, vigorous air of the hill was delightful. Striding rapidly along, he felt his whole being become cleansed and vivified, and an unaccustomed elation seemed for the instant to add spring and rhythm to his steps.

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Coming back he was overtaken by his doctor, who came out of the gates of the fever hospital in his car. Claude accepted the little man's offer of a lift, and they were soon spinning smoothly and silently along.

"You're looking better to-day," said the doctor in a tone of brisk professionalism. "Exercise is the thing. I see you've been having some lately. Now you were really seedy the last time I gave you a lift down this way."

Claude made no reply. In the fading light he had the fleeting impression that the doctor was looking at him sideways from the corner of an alert and curious eye. As he got out of the car and said good-night he asked himself, "Now when did the little crank give me a lift before?—I half remember . . ."

II

That first night on which he saw the dream-woman and tried to make paper and pencil record something of her fascination hung for some time in his mind as an uneasy memory. Fresh air and exercise did something to lift him out of morbid introspection, but there were still bad times when cold baths and long tramps lost their saving power, and all the good work seemed to be undone.

In the evening an unhealthy exaltation would sometimes come upon him, and he would grow excited, flushed and feverish. Or in the morning, languorous, enervating visions would float luxuriously before him, and he would give himself up to them, half gladly,

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half ashamedly, as to some illicit joy. Strangely enough he connected these bad times with the haunting woman of his dreams.

It was about a fortnight later that he saw her again. He awoke in the morning with the same face, beautiful and mocking, set before him. There as he looked at it, it seemed to be steeped in pensive light, and the bronze gold of its clustering curls moved gently in the breeze. A peculiar sadness, almost a reproach, dwelt in the eyes. Once the lips moved, talking. . . .

Again Claude, wrestling and battling with himself, sat in his workroom after breakfast, striving to portray the face that haunted him. A poet would have sought to envisage the ineffable in verse, a composer might have agonised his passion into terms of sound, the artist was driven as surely to the one mode of expression that lay open.

This time he felt the task come easier. The face that had so baffled all his efforts at the first attempt now seemed a little less vague and impossible of transcription. Claude wondered whether this were due merely to a lessening of the ideal. He opened a drawer, and, taking from it his previous trials, compared them with what he had just drawn. Both were infinitely disappointing, yet of the two the later drawn was certainly the clearer.

A curious feeling came upon him, and a perplexed expression passed over his face. Turning his eyes away from the drawings he looked out of the window, his brows knit in mental effort. It was no doubt a passing fancy, but for a moment he could almost

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swear that the faces on the paper were somehow linked up with a forgotten previous experience. He had the baffling sense of strain and tension that sometimes accompanies a supreme attempt at recollection.

He turned to the drawing again, and, taking up his pencil, began somewhat idly to sketch new lines into the shadowy background. Once more he wondered why this face took such hold upon his imagination. He had seen it but twice or thrice in his dreams, yet even now, in a relatively calm and sober moment, his whole being thrilled in ecstasy before it. Dreamily he asked himself what it was in the flowing, somewhat sensuous lines of the face that appealed to him with such overwhelming power. It was a pity he was so dead tired that morning—with a little more energy he might have finished the thing, but he had risen as little refreshed as if he had not slept. Yes . . .

A peculiar thing was happening. As he was thus drowsily puzzling, his pencil was mechanically passing over the paper before him. Presently the preoccupied artist awoke from his reverie and looked down. A startled exclamation escaped him. The background which before had been vague and nebulous was now filled in with some clearness. What was more, it seemed strongly to suggest some place that he had seen. On the left sloping lines indicated a hillside, and beyond was the white, winding ribbon of a descending path.

Claude looked wonderingly at the drawing. He had heard of reporters who had taken down lengthy speeches verbatim whilst they themselves were talking

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or half asleep, but this was the first time he had had a like experience. It was even a little eerie. He was certain he knew this place that he had drawn. To be sure, a hillside slope with a winding path was no uncommon conjunction, but there was still the peculiar feeling of instant recognition to be accounted for. Now where had he seen this place before? He cast his mind back over the walks of the last week, but could find no satisfactory answer.

He tried then to get the face clear before him just as it had appeared to him in his dreams. One thing was immediately apparent—the *macabre* scenery of the drawing had attached itself to the face. The artist laughed. "This," he thought, "would interest the little doctor who's always psychology mad——" Then suddenly his laughter died away. A queer thought had come to him.

It presented itself something like this. What if this woman is something more than a mere dream, what if, somewhere back in my experience, I have actually met her, what if, in some place that I half remember, she is really living now?

The idea was startling. It took strong hold upon him, and he considered it carefully in all its bearings. He had, indeed, an undercurrent of sceptical thought, but the notion was so interesting that he would continue at least to play with it. All that morning he wondered over it, even going to the trouble, though smilingly, of looking through an old album of family photographs. At the end of his otherwise fruitless endeavours one thing at least appeared

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certain—somewhere he had really seen that hillside slope and the descending path.

III

When he was roused the next morning, he knew that he had had the dream again. He was dog tired, and his whole body ached from top to toe. The August morning light that filtered through the Venetian blinds seemed to his mind to discover frowse and a squalid disorder in his bedroom. His clothes were strewn riotously about the room, and, lying in different corners, were his boots, thickly stained with chalk. Petulantly he noticed, too, that he had left his door open, so that through it now ascended the sound of wakeful bustle in the kitchen. His throat was sore and parched and his temples throbbed.

That morning he could do no work. In the afternoon he went for his usual walk over the Downs, and once again upon the lonely hills he pondered the problem of the dream.

Half unconsciously he turned his steps in the direction of a western spur lying some two miles from the town. It was not one of his favourite walks, but he lacked energy for a climb into the lonelier and more beautiful uplands, and pursued indolently what for some reason proved to be the path of least resistance. Here the backs of mean cottages gave on to the sinuous track, and some miserable fowls scuttled before him, raising clouds of dust; farther on and to the right larger buildings threatened—an isolation

hospital and the straddling ugliness of a waterworks.

Suddenly he remembered where he was. In a flash the sordid prospect about him became familiar. This was where he had walked two weeks or more ago, and straight before him waited the evil little valley. In another moment a further connection had made itself apparent—later on where the path dipped into the depression in the down the view was exactly that of his later dreams. In the sudden shock of discovery Claude found himself trembling with a strange excitement.

He went on, walking rapidly. It was still hot, and he mopped his face with his handkerchief. In his rear, following more slowly at a distance of several hundred yards, came slouching a farm hand, and at his heels a dog.

Claude soon reached the parting in the ways where the lower track skirted the sloping ground that rose to the upland gallops on the left. It was here that the country of his dreams was set; there he saw the sombre hillside and there the white path dipping downwards to the valley bottom. Without stopping he walked on quickly, and began with hurrying pulses to descend the track. Behind him, coming at more moderate pace, lurched the labourer and his dog.

Presently, on turning a sharpish bend, he saw below him the little hollow, pent in by the sides of the hill and circled by a coarse and ragged growth of bramble. With the sight there came a vision hanging in his eyes of something foul and violent. Something quick and furtive done hurriedly in an evil moment amid

the crowding obscenities of twilight, something that had happened and he could half remember. A feeling of misgiving rose strong within him and a perspiration broke out on his face and round his wrists.

In the valley, partly covered by a tangle of gross plants, lay a rotting log, and behind it, screened by the rank weeds, and bordered by the rude hedge of brambles, stretched a ditch. Here the coarse vegetation was bruised and dashed, and the smell of trampled nettles still hung heavy in the air.

Sick with nameless fear, Claude stopped in front of the spot and looked, fascinated. Under the odorous litter of dying weed the ground seemed to be scraped together in a heap, and here and there in the soil about the log were long, curving marks such as might be made by writhing feet. A horrid suspicion gained possession of his mind; he hesitated, trembling, half inclined to leave the place before the entry of the oncoming labourer.

While he vacillated, the dog, now some little distance ahead of its master, came sniffing curiously along the ditch. In another moment it had reached the heap and stopped. Then, suddenly plunging down its head, the creature started scratching.

It had come! First a shoe and then a foot, and next the torn edges of a skirt appeared. Quickly now the animal in its excitement turned to the other end of the huddled mass, and dragged away a heap of crumpled weed that hid what lay beneath.

The afternoon sun, beating strongly down upon that evil scene, fell aslant the face of the labourer

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stricken into bucolic terror by what he saw. It shone too into the staring eyes of Claude, pale blue marbles that fixed themselves in horror upon the sight of violence. He, the poor, nerve-racked Multiple, was looking with all the curious, almost detached intentness of a struck mind at what he had half expected to see—the face of the victim of his loving and homicidal other self—the woman he had murdered in his dreams.

Drowsily the flies were buzzing.

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IN THE late autumn of that year you speak of, visitors were still plentiful in the Bay. Down there the season is pretty well remembered, for Horrocks' Old Pier was washed away in October, and by the new year Mrs. Lorimer had worn her gown of Grenoble puce of which everybody talked so much. . . .

One bleak morning by the shore a girl stood and watched the cold sea tumbling in so numbly and so endlessly upon the land. Her identity is immaterial. From behind her stole a man, tall and great-coated. She turned at his approach, her hand raised to steady her hat, caught in the boisterous wind. "Adelaide!" said the man, and "Hugh!" exclaimed she as naively. A hurried glance up and down the shore and then a kiss. Arm in arm they left the beach, and presently had vanished into the distance of upland lawn and flying cloud.

After them others passed at intervals, passed and faded up into that queer background of shadowy sward and sky. And presently a small boy crept out from behind a clump of undergrowth, shivering a little in his monkey-jacket, looking up the shore against the drive of the wind. He had seen the couple kiss, and was gazing after, an uneasy wonder in his eyes.

Days came and went with mingled light and shade, and the Grenoble puce was heard of no more. The couple who had kissed had set up house under Mrs. Lorimer's benediction and had begun to entertain in a mild way. They had Mr. English's orchestra down

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from London, and Mr. English himself conducted his "Fleet Overture," a sad thing certainly, but charming.

Excitement was afforded towards mid-February by the elopement of the Duke's water-bailiff with the Flemings' governess, a pert hussy, who had made eyes at him under Mrs. Lorimer's very nose, whilst almost immediately after this enormity came the discovery of Mr. Fleming's aunt dead in bed of the shingles (so it was said) at her hotel. This, it was felt, was intense to the verge of indecency.

One looks back at that old winter season at the Bay and sees it always in a setting of flying cloud and a lift grey with the threat of rain. The quaint figures that pass and repass are gilded now and then with the glamour of a spent age—that glamour which the Boy pursued and later, for a space, renounced as a delusion.

For during all the time that followed, a Boy was growing up for whom this strange, dead charm of the 'seventies at the Bay was to pulse and swell into something like a passion. Long years afterwards, often at the oddest moments, in the bustle of the city or the quiet of his room, the flavour of the place and time would rise upon him as a flood and he would catch his breath and wait. It would steal over him something like the faint odour of musk and faded rose-leaves from a casket locked for ages, or the lilt of a long-forgotten melody played very softly in the distance upon muted strings. . . .

Now the Boy who felt all this so fiercely was he who had seen the nameless couple kissing in the wind

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on that long-back autumn day. His vision was from time to time renewed by irregular visits to the Bay, and his name, as you remember, was Mark Hastings.

And meanwhile, as he grows, and his spirit fashions for itself the tortures that shall consume it, the seasons come and go in due progression. Mr. English's orchestra, permanently established, is more popular than ever, the after-dinner faces of the elect seem to float rapt and lost in a panelled world arock to the beauties of the "Fleet Overture," and out beyond them, over the chilly sea, that high lift and drive of the constant wind shouts and whistles by the cliffs in brusque antiphony.

They had a fire in the March of '79, and the Cobbolds' Arms was gutted to a shell, but of this the Boy, Mark Hastings, saw nothing, being then in attendance at a school for the sons of gentlemen in Camberwell.

Fashion, so far as woman was concerned, had set towards the ensemble of puffed sleeves, a veil, and diminutive headgear. It was a chilly afternoon in February, and Mark Hastings was stepping into Pleasant and Dilpenny's in the Arcade to purchase a cigar.

The Bay he loved had grown, but had preserved its characteristics, and in Mrs. Lorimer's stead there reigned her married niece—a grand lady, dispensing rusks and china tea from her lawns by the South Light on summer Wednesday afternoons.

The ten years or so that had seen the Boy out of

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the school in Camberwell, through the University, and into an Admiralty Office had written lines upon his forehead and turned down the corners of his mouth. He wore a modest buttonhole, and sported a beaver vest. The cigar at which he puffed completed his appearance of holiday.

For all that he was not festive. An orphan since the days at Camberwell, he had been left too much alone until the time came for him to go to Cambridge. There he had been rather miserable without exactly knowing why, and had grown unconsciously to hate the modern spirit of the place, its boisterous life, its glib omniscience, its knack of exposing, almost daily and quite casually, things he had supposed sacred. Fortunate indeed for Mark that he had proved an oarsman! His maiden aunt at the Bay, Miss Mildred Soames, with whom he stayed, held him to be dyspeptic and, perhaps inconsequently, prescribed senna pods and a carminative.

To-night he was committed to adventure. He was to go to the Grand Theatre with Starkie and Charles Summers, two of his Admiralty acquaintances, and after that—they had spoken slyly of stage doors, taunting him with callowness and lack of enterprise, and in an impatient moment he had accepted their challenge, though contemptuously.

He took his place in the stalls between the two young bloods from town, rather conspicuous by reason of his fine head with its mass of black hair, and the martyred expression in his eyes.

An Opera company was giving "Masaniello,"

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and at the first few notes Mark sat up tense and rigid. He had heard this thing of Auber's before and had not been affected. To-night the music was nobler, subtler, more reticent. It could mingle as an equal with the sound of the surf upon the shore and that high striving of the wind on sea and cliff.

Years afterwards, when the gathering pain pressed upon him like a great Regret, the remembered cry of flute and violin and the faint fragrance of lavender and frangipani could still bring the smart of tears to his eyes. In the sights and sounds of the provincial theatre and the queer, old-fashioned opera, poorly produced and poorly rendered, even in the odour of a preposterous bouquet of Starkie's flowering within his upturned opera hat, a hidden passion was being summed and voiced at last. It was one of Life's atrocious ironies.

Not till the second act did he notice the face. It was a girl's—she was playing some minor part, he thought—a girl with great wide eyes and an occasional strange, slanting smile. The changing light was playing strange tricks. Now she seemed like youth, gay, care-free, and innocent; now the face was branded by knowledge as by a burn and the eyes held a screened cynicism. . . . An unsuspected boyishness in Mark rose to meet the music and the girl, and for moments on end he was bright-eyed, chivalrous and grand.

At the end of the performance he drew a deep breath and looked at his two friends. People about

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them were applauding genteelly. He was astounded that they were not more enthusiastic. Summers was yawning and fumbling for his watch, and Mark, with an unreasonable stab of pain, saw Starkie produce his bouquet. "For the Malvini," explained that gentleman with a self-satisfied smirk. "What, didn't you know she was on?" He guffawed loudly, disappearing with unnecessary haste into a series of devious corridors along which Mark and Summers followed him with difficulty.

At length they came upon him, inflamed and abusive, disputing with a message boy outside a closed door. In one hand he held his bouquet, upon which Mark noticed what appeared to be a note torn neatly into two pieces. Starkie was looking at it with a comic air of incredulity and rage. "I tell you it's a mistake," he said thickly. "She can't mean that!"

"The dark gentleman, the one who was in the middle," replied the messenger, coldly insistent. He looked up and saw Mark. "This way, sir, please," he said, and turned the knob of the closed door.

The next moment Starkie had flung away from them with an ugly oath, and Mark was following the message boy down a long passage. He was much too bewildered to be surprised.

She was sitting on a tiny, white-painted chair, and looked up with a quick smile at Mark as he entered the room, hesitating and abashed. His gaze devoured her—the girl of his enchantment, a thousand times more lovely even than he had imagined. Somehow

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he had thought of her as playing a lesser part. She was the Malvini, this girl. Why did his heart sink at the thought?

She summoned him to her side with a laughing gesture. "I want to know you," she was saying. "I've heard of you from Rorie—that's Mr. Starkie—I told him I couldn't see him to-night. He's grown unbearable and gives me the blues. Wait in the next room while I change."

Heaven knows what reply he made or how he bore himself when, for the second time, he was admitted to the goddess. He got over it somehow, as one invariably does survive the unendurable, and found himself seeing her to her hotel.

He said good-night to her very awkwardly at the entrance to the lounge, devoured by secret pangs. She had bidden him call for her the next day, "if he liked." She was "an improper person wanting to be good. Yes, really!"

For a moment he must have looked absurdly earnest at such confessions, for she went off into peals of laughter. Finally, as he turned away, she kissed her hand to him.

With the agony of death in his heart he politely raised his hat.

The next fortnight passed as a fevered dream. He saw the Malvini constantly (her name, he found, was Nita), and was for the time as desperately in love as man may be.

After an oyster-and-champagne supper at Swilling's on the Parade, she invited him to kiss her. He did

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so, passionately enough, but somewhere near her ear as it happened, so that she laughed coldly, asking him where he had learned to *ménager* his emotions so perfectly.

Finally, of course, came the inevitable evening—the dying sun, the breeze on their cheeks, the little flippancies of speech and gesture confessing what they seemed to hide, all the raw hurt and smart of passion. He loved her, he would always love her, she was dear, dear. . . . Her head was on his shoulder and she clung to him, crying.

Between sobs she told him it was impossible. She could never be to him what he wanted. Something in her voice besought him not to ask her why. He saw her back to the hotel, kissed her good-bye in the darkness of the street, and returned to his aunt Mildred.

Ten days later he received a letter from Nita. It was rather confused, but full of regrets. She was in a decline, it seemed. They could never have been married. She thanked him many times for his "friendship." He had been "such a dear boy." Would he just send his photo and then not write again?

He did as she desired, and then, relinquishing his beaver vest, his buttonhole, and his interest in life, returned to the Admiralty office. Starkie and Summers greeted him with uneasy jeers.

All this was just a year before the death of his aunt and Mark's accession to her property at the Bay.

By which time having met the Hallidays, he looked

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upon the whole Malvini episode as one of the indiscretions of his youth.

For two years Mark travelled through Europe with the Hallidays and forgot the Bay. They were modern, these Hallidays, very go-ahead, and bent on reforming Mark with the greatest possible tact. They had designs on his character, on his appearance, on his manners, and intended to make him efficient and forceful like themselves. All this and more, until one day Mark caught them at it, cancelled his investments in Uncle Halliday's Syndicate, and retired on his property at the Bay.

He found the old place changed, but was unable to say how. The jetty was still there, and the lawns, and the yellow bow fronts of boarding houses looking out, row upon row, over the restless sea. They had built a camera obscura just opposite Darcy's bathing machines, and Mark smiled, a trifle sadly, at the evident excitement which it caused.

His aunt's house appeared smaller and less imposing than of yore. It seemed almost mean. It was gloomy too, descending into the bowels of the earth to a dim basement. Mark stayed there a week and then gave up the attempt. He advertised the property for sale, and the whole place was gone, furniture and all, within a fortnight.

Then he had his accident. In crossing a street in town, whither he had gone and bought a small villa residence at Hampstead, he stumbled, slipped, and was run over. A wheel of the cart ran neatly along

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one of his legs and across one side of his face. He was picked up and, by his own directions, conveyed to his new house in Hampstead, where the carpets were not even laid. Mark had rather a long illness in spite of an excellent trained nurse. They furnished one room completely while he lay in another, and then shifted him. When he was convalescent two of the Hallidays called speculatively, but were almost openly repudiated. They found bitter satisfaction in comment upon Mark's condition. "Oh, yes," they said to each other, "he's got over it all right. But his face! He'll be disfigured for life!"

So soon as he was able he visited the Bay. He limped now and it took him longer than it used to get from the station to the sea. All the way down to the shore he was conscious of a queer feeling approaching elation, and began to ask himself the reason. On the sea front, where the wind met him and the grey expanse of tumbled ocean lay out before him, he found the explanation suddenly. His innocence was renewed. He had got back the Bay.

Despite his limp he must have walked far that evening. Out along the line of curving shore the façades of houses showed up bright against the dull welter of sea and sky, and now from out the west a light sting of rain was beginning to drive into Mark's face. The crude flare of a crumpled scrap of paper—an old playbill in gaudy orange—swept by his feet in the mild breeze. He cut at it absently with his stick and strode on, pensive.

That old song of wind and sea was mingling in

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his brain with a remembered tune. A melody that the Malvini had sung. It was now five years ago. He smiled suddenly, and then as quickly the smile faded from him. He sat down on one of the green-painted seats and began to think.

He had had other loves since then—loves in Paris and in Rome. Under the Hallidays' tuition he had conducted such affairs rather well, he thought, until they bored him. Now, in the emotional tumult of his rediscovery of the Bay, that Malvini fortnight seemed to call to him out of the past with infinite wistfulness, like something dear and lost and inconceivably remote. He found the tears springing in his eyes. Presently, tired and faint, he was half dozing, and in a sort of dream he lived through that glamorous time of passion and regret. It was to be his life's dream.

You see what was happening—and all by the merest accident perhaps—sheer chance combination of conditions—his accident and disfigurement, a certain amount of tenderness and self-pity, the unaccustomed strain of his walk, the old memories aroused. He might have awakened to bathos and disillusionment at any moment. But the spell held. It is one of those things a little difficult to understand. Through those few minutes of half slumber, in the remembrance of that heavy theatre with its meretricious ornament, by the onrush of its Victorian atmosphere, so queerly compact of callousness and *naïveté*, Mark's soul was being formed and moulded. It might have chosen nobler occasion for the operation!

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Now as memory gave him back the cry of the strings and the bright eyes and parted lips of the girl, he found in them a vindication of all the old forsaken things he wished to conserve and cherish, the call of a religion, the revelation of a mystery. He had set off for that walk along the front as a jaded and rather cynical invalid. He was to return to Hampstead presently as a sort of Ishmaelite, nursing a fine and subtle hurt, glorying in it, with the age-long cry of the initiated for the profane rising ever in his mind. "They do not understand. They cannot understand!"

Years passed and the fascination grew. He came upon an old daguerreotype of the Malvini and had it framed. He visited the Bay constantly to re-tread the paths which they had walked together, and, half ashamedly, searched the old files of the *Bay Observer* for accounts of her performance. He observed the anniversaries of their meeting, their little excursions, the first kiss, and the last. Perhaps it was strange that in all this seething welter of glamorous reminiscence he made no attempt to discover the possibly living Nita. . . .

Mark was now middle-aged and in easy circumstances. He wrote in a desultory fashion. The Bay and the Malvini were his hobbies. He indulged them as if they had been pet vices, cautiously and with restraint. People said that as a result of his disfigurement his nature had been warped. Certainly, to all but one he was morose, difficult, and unpendable.

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To this one, Albert Charnell, a wealthy bachelor, Mark had confided little by little what he considered to be the story of his life. It was, perhaps, hardly likely to find a sympathetic listener, but, by an extraordinary chance, he had struck upon the one man in London capable of understanding. Charnell had been "disappointed in love," and spent his life in nursing the memory of his early passion with a sort of fierce and morbid joy. He it is who tells us of the final episode with which Mark's history closes.

It was twenty-five years since the Malvini had sung at the Grand Theatre, and Charnell was staying at the Bay alone. Mark was expected in about three days' time. Meanwhile his friend divided his time between his books, his walks, and his games of patience.

Charnell was striding fiercely (he did everything fiercely except speak) along the outskirts of a crowd that had assembled round a troupe of pierrots when his attention was attracted suddenly by one of the performers. It would be difficult to say what it was exactly about the girl, or rather woman, which so affected him, but he stopped in his rapid walk and waited until, the performance over, the crowd began to thin away from the little arena. Presently the pierrots came out through a small door at the back of the stage, and Charnell quickly picked out the woman whose appearance had so unaccountably seized upon his imagination. She was joined, even as he watched, by a rough-looking man in a check suit and leggings who had been amongst the onlookers.

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They passed quite close to him, and Charnell gave an involuntary start. The woman's face, though aged and coarsened, was almost undoubtedly that of the daguerreotype which Mark had showed him. It was Malvini.

Mark arrived at the Bay a day or two later, but his friend made no mention of what he had seen. In the late afternoon Mark was smoking over the fire, and once again Charnell listened to the ancient story of yearning and desire.

"Albert!" said Mark. "This is the anniversary of her going. Twenty-five years back!"

"It has always surprised me, Mark," replied the other, "that, afterwards, you made no attempt to follow her. Forgive me if I speak too plainly."

Mark started and his cheeks grew pale. He muttered something below his breath, fidgeted, and averted his eyes. Charnell was confirmed in an opinion. The idea of following Malvini had simply never occurred to Mark!

"Suppose you met her again, Mark, what then?"

"Why ask? Such things happen in dreams only. Twenty-five years, it's too late, too late! Besides, Albert, her letter—you remember."

Charnell, who had a mind of Gallic clarity, noticed another thing. The explanation provided by Malvini's letter had been mentioned merely as a kind of afterthought.

Evening was falling, and Mark went out alone. In a couple of hours he was back. Charnell felt instinctively that something had happened.

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The light had well-nigh faded in the glimmering west as Mark began to speak.

"Albert," he was saying, "I have had an experience just now. I met somebody upon the hill—the hill where I used to meet her."

After a long pause Charnell replied slowly: "I think I understand, Mark. For the moment—you—mistook. Was there much resemblance?"

"To the very life! Changed, of course, but unbearably the same. I could not have stood it, Albert. When I looked at her face, under a lamp, it was—oh, impossible—coarse. I cannot help it, there is no other word. . . . I asked her who she was."

"Well?"

"Albert, the voice was the same. I could have sworn it. She would not tell me for a long time. She kept looking at me under the lamp."

"Yes."

"She was—her sister. They were twins.—She told me——"

"And the other—Malvini. What of her?"

"Dead. And only to-night."

"To-night!"

"Yes. She was crying about it, this other girl. I had an idea at first she was crying over what she must have seen in my face when I looked at her. You see, I was—shocked—by what I saw."

The other made no reply. Life was a strange thing. He was trying to picture the twilight meeting of ghost with ghost. The futility of it all—the vast

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cynicism! Surely there was nothing pathetic left in all the world but the very fatuity of pathos.

The dusk deepened and a little wind arose. Neither of them broke the stillness. Lights appeared one by one upon the far-flung crescent of the Bay.

"It is fortunate for Mark," thought the friend, "that she saw his face in time. She had the decency not to reveal herself. Her sister! And he believes it—or says he does! Well, that leaves him his glamour. Heavens, but we are queerly made!"

LURE

I

"LONG years back. When the wind blew on the downlands and the gulls were wheeling. Long years back."

It is an old house, still standing on the coast of Somerset, and the grey sweep of the horizon, the fierce rush and tumble of the waters coming up from Herriott, are calling Michael still.

He has not answered the summons yet, and perhaps he never will, for he is ageing fast. The hoarse murmuring that rises from the waves by Smale goes on without him just as he used to hear it from the gorge above, and the blue flares of borage that come out year by year upon the cliff might be the very flowers that filled the hands of Lallie long ago. I think he may be wise to leave the place unvisited, for all this country of his childhood lives in his memory with a finer ache than he could catch again. . . .

From the old house above the bay he would walk out daily as a little boy into a world of wonders. He was small for his age, stockily built, with a brown face and dark eyes always flickering and playing. What did he see with those questioning eyes of his? His father, Captain William Fortescue Farrow, tugging thoughtfully at his grey moustache and following his small son with quiet strides along the cliff edge or up the downland slopes may well have wondered. Certain things seem to have moved the little Michael unutterably—the ships tossing at their distant moorings in the channel, faint glories over Mappin Island on a winter's day, the bright wind of Hale singing in

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the grasses of a paddock by the sea. Perhaps his father could follow him a little way into that wonderland of childhood; Michael would hold his hand when they walked together and pull him that way and this, saying little, but always with the air of one who performs rites and interprets mysteries.

Once Michael suggested to his father that they should retire from the world and live together hidden in the lumber-room. "We could get fish," he explained, "from a boy in the village. We would pull it up through the window." The Captain considered the proposal thoughtfully. "It is a fine idea, Michael," he said at length, "a very exciting idea, but what about Mother?" Michael felt there was no answer to that and bore his disappointment stoically. Through his chagrin he had the feeling, however, that his father's objection had been delicately advanced as between man and man.

Shortly after this, when Michael was about eight, the Captain died, and for the first time the conflict between expediency and romance became apparent. It had been incipient in the incident of the lumber-room, but now it rose sharply into prominence with the arrival of Aunt Wilderspin.

Into the midst of his grief for his dead father she alighted one chilly day from the Bath coach, surrounded by band-boxes. "Kiss me," she demanded, and pecked at him. "Wilderspin," he muttered with hostility below his breath. She caught the murmured word and frowned. "Aunt Kate," she corrected him sourly. "Aunt Kate come to stay."

LURE

From day to day his old free life along the shore and up the hills became increasingly something to be fought for. His mother, hitherto a negative, somewhat tired lady, beautiful in black sateen, became subtly antagonistic under the influence of Aunt Wilderspin, and he found his precious hours of vagabondage pared and trimmed.

But when he could escape to scramble on the cliffs or race along the sands his forbidden wanderings were all the sweeter. Out by Hardie, where the river was running brown, and the sea-fowl mewed and bickered on the shining flats, there was a new joy for little Michael in the cold wind. These were moments of the wild, stolen moments, when he confronted his heart's desire, feeding all of that fierce devotion, that strange yearning, half joy, half pain, which clung to him all his life like a sort of subtle, underlying flavour, or a lingering, half-remembered tune.

It must have been somewhere in the 'seventies that he went to school. The house, Herriott, looms in his remembrance of this period with a certain sinister power and fascination. He slept and had his breakfast and supper at home, and twice a day had to pass the tall old Caroline mansion, towering upon its lonely cliff, facing the stormy west with winking rows of mullioned windows.

Here one day he met a little girl. He was plucking apples in a neglected orchard stretching almost to the sea, and had scrambled up into one of the stunted, wind-tortured trees. Suddenly an apple fell neatly on his head and he heard a laugh above him. He

LURE

looked up, and, balancing herself precariously upon a higher branch, saw Lallie.

She was not a nice girl according to standards. She was pertly roguish and pretty enough to carry for a time all that vague, shifting glamour which up to then had played about the daily sights and sounds of Michael's wanderings. Beyond this she was the precocious child of wealthy parents, knowing already something of the world's pleasures and not a little of its sins. Michael became her miserable slave.

They are on the sands together. Above them rise the cliffs and away in the distance the house, Herriott, towers through a light haze. Besides themselves no human beings can be seen.

"Mick, say you love me."

"I love you." Michael looks uncomfortable but sincere.

"I don't believe you. Sing to me. That song with the 'Ahoy, ahoy' in it."

"I don't know it." This is untrue. Rather strangely "Larboard Watch" is about the only song he does know.

"Oh, yes, you do. I heard you once. Don't look so glum. But of course you're sorry you played truant to see me. I forgot."

"No, I'm not. You know I'm not, Lallie."

"Then sing."

He sings, and it is an awesome, husky bellow that he gives unto the wind from Herriott. Lallie goes into fits of laughter, and he stops, a dull flush mounting his cheeks.

LURE

"If you laugh at me, Lallie, I'm going. I can't sing; you know it."

"I should, by now! Well, then, gloomy, get me those blue flowers on the cliff."

"You can't get up there. It's next to impossible."

"Oh, all right. If you're afraid . . ."

Ten minutes later and the flowers, a big bunch, were in Lallie's hands. Michael had risked his neck to get them and he knew it. He was always ready to give himself for love.

"They aren't so very pretty after all, are they? I thought—— Oh, who's that queer man coming along the sands? How funny he looks!"

It was Mr. George Bishop, the retired ship-owner, a wealthy man and the pioneer of some obscure sect. He was vastly admired by Aunt Kate Wilderspin.

"He's staring at us, Mick. Do you know him? He'll see you here with me. Oh, what trouble you'll get into! I'm going before he comes."

Thus ended his intimacy with Lallie. The story of his wickedness was told by Mr. Bishop to Mrs. Farrow, and that lady wrote a note to Lallie's mother, Mrs. Shrub, an extraordinary indiscretion, calling forth a vulgar and contemptuous reply. Shortly afterwards Lallie and her parents left Herriott for London.

Somehow Michael connected the sudden withdrawal of Lallie from his world with that still-remembered incident of the lumber-room. There was the same feeling of fierce disappointment, the same mad longing, balked of satisfaction. Twice the door to an

enchanted garden had seemed to open—and had closed at his approach. That the first occasion was trivial mattered nothing—so was the second, judged by ordinary standards. It was the point of view that counted. Slowly the new wound healed, and the boy returned to his old loves—but with a difference.

His mother and aunt decided after discussion with Mr. and Mrs. Bishop that Michael should be a doctor. His father had dedicated him to the army, but Sandhurst was out of the question, and, besides that, Mrs. Farrow had an idea that when qualified he could start his practice near home. Michael at that time had no objections to offer. For a year longer he took special lessons at the day school in preparation for his matriculation, and twice a day the house, Herriott, towered upon his way.

It was a period of unrest and discontent. For a time, however, the sheer, dumb beauty of the Somersetshire coast brought unconscious solace to his soul. He would return from school towards evening after a long ramble, dirty, tired, hungry, and smelling of the sea. After an early supper he would go to bed. Then, for a few drowsy, happy moments before he fell asleep, the things that he had seen would seem to cry upon him with a sort of foolish tenderness. They would press and surge before him in a nameless pathos, wreathed and woven into magic combinations, glamorous, invested with a queer, heart-breaking glory. . . . Then, outside, whilst he slept, the sea breeze would loiter round the cliff with those occasional sudden drops of tone which his old nurse,

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Mrs. Brent, compared to hiccups, and, entering his window with the sound of waves and the smell of seaweed, would steal upon him like the very breath of fancy and subtly tinge his dreams.

He would awake, however, with the old gods broken and discredited, to find these dreams had been of Lallie.

At about this time Clara Bishop loomed upon him.

She was an only daughter, given to good works, a big girl, with fair, shining hair and a face that had fine lustrous eyes, but avid lips. Sometimes when Michael came home from school it was to find her sitting in the drawing room, knitting and talking to his mother. At his coming she would greet him with a strange sort of repressed effusion, as if she welcomed him on tiptoe. For an hour, perhaps, she would stay, with two bright spots of colour in her cheeks, gasping about him like some awkward animal. Michael was then about seventeen, and she some two years older.

When the young Farrow journeyed up to London to sit for his examination, it was the face of Clara Bishop that to his half-amused dismay hung with its conciliatory smile about the background of his thoughts. . . . He began to call her the "dear gazelle."

In London, after his examination, the door that led to the enchanted garden opened once more.

Roaming in the Docks at Blackwall he came upon an old man with a frosty beard and a loud voice that carried, nevertheless, a queer, languorous note—a

beautiful, soft bellow. He had skippered a clipper, built in the days when the race home with the first season's tea was a romance, and was now spending his days pottering about the quayside and sucking meditatively at his pipe.

He introduced Michael to his great friend, a younger man, still in command of a fine vessel—the *Nestor*—and the two seamen then lounged smoking against a huge bollard, chatting fitfully, casting between whiles kindly glances at the young Michael.

It was the devouring pain of it that gripped him—a thing he could not understand. He had a lightning vision of years of moil and slavery under lurid skies, the foul hugger-mugger of crowded fo'c's'les, the occasional harsh brilliance of the glittering bar-parlours of foreign ports on nights ashore. . . . They had not told him this; it was something he had sensed behind faint smiles and euphemisms. He resolved straightway to ship before the mast if necessary, and left London for Somerset with something like a pact concluded between himself and the indulgent skipper of the *Nestor*.

Three months later, however, he was in London, deep in anatomy and physiology.

The door was shut against him once again, but this time there was a difference in its closing. He had had to turn the key and shoot home the bolts himself.

There had, of course, been scenes at home. He had been made to feel with a grim dismay the enormity and folly of the thing he contemplated. Considera-

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tion for his mother, regard for his own future, worldly wisdom in a word, had risen against him as unexpected antagonists and had prevailed.

"It is in your own hands, my darling," had said Mrs. Farrow. "We cannot force you. We can only show you what is really for your good. Think of your poor old Mother and Aunt Kate—and Clara." The reference to Clara at all events struck him as gratuitous and particularly futile. He spent some time wondering about it.

Once, at the hospital, he had a mad impulse to take the blame for a nasty affair in which a man he knew was implicated. This person was not a friend of the young Farrow's, hardly even an acquaintance, and had Michael intervened, his own professional career would assuredly have ended. He tried to congratulate himself on having kept clear of Manning's scrape. Quixotic self-sacrifice such as he had for the moment contemplated he certainly could not afford. Yet afterwards, when Manning had vanished ignominiously, he had the uneasy suspicion that somehow another door had closed upon him. . . . However, when he mentioned the affair to Clara on his next visit home, she assured him he was foolish to worry over such a matter.

Michael became engaged to Clara about three years later. He had qualified, and was now trying to start a practice at Illington, a few miles south of Smale. Mrs. Brent had migrated from his old home to serve as his housekeeper.

I believe he was rather a sleek young person then,

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well-liking and basking in the favour of God and man. The sun used to shine on his nice Victorian face as if it approved of him, and he must have been for those few years a different kind of being altogether from the fine and ravaged Michael whom we know. . . .

It was, however, in the very October of his engagement to Clara that Lallie with her parents returned to Herriott from London, so that the glamour of the place and of her presence began again to fight against his satisfaction and repose.

II

She seemed smaller than he remembered her, having grown less quickly than he. Her hair was bound in a new way with just the suspicion of a fringe and she wore tiny earrings. She met him where the road to Smale ran at the back of Herriott.

"Hello, Mick!" she cried, and held out a hand.

He shook it, looking at her uneasily.

"How you've changed!" she said. "I hardly knew you. That silk hat looks horribly uncomfortable. Let's see, you're a doctor, aren't you, and engaged to Clara Bishop? You see, I've heard all about you."

They walked slowly towards Herriott, deep in conversation. He gave covert glances at her red lips, her little round, laughing face, her modern clothes.

When he said good-bye to her at the old stone

gateway they had arranged to meet on the following day. "Don't tell anyone, Mick. Remember. It makes it so much more exciting."

The meeting, however, never took place, for that evening Mrs. Farrow died. She had been suffering from heart trouble for years, but the end came as an unexpected blow to Michael. It was not until after the funeral that he again saw Lallie.

He thought she must be much improved. Several things in her old treatment of him as a boy carried a sting even in retrospect, but Lallie grown up seemed all smiles and kindness. . . . During the fortnight following his bereavement she was gentleness itself, so that more and more he came to look to her for solace and friendship as to a sweet and sympathetic sister. Had he guessed the circumstances under which this new and chastened Lallie had been removed by her parents to the lonely coast of Somerset his consolation might have been shortlived. As it was, he thought it rather strange that she should say so little of her people. . . .

Of Clara, meanwhile, he gradually saw less and less. He hardly realised how little until one day the big, awkward creature burst in upon him, crying, as he sat in his consulting room at Illington. Her father had been taken ill. She was afraid he was going to die. And where had Michael been all the time? She had seen nothing of him for days and days.

She looked at him with great, reproachful eyes like some loving, foolish hound's, and he was full of pity. He wondered how much she knew of his growing

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friendship with Lallie, and determined to tell her rather than leave her to discover it for herself. On the way to Mr. Bishop's house he mentioned Lallie casually. "Oh, yes, I know," said Clara, and looked away. He thought her preoccupied with her own anxiety and was glad to let the subject drop.

Mr. Bishop died after an illness of some weeks and for a time Michael was constantly with Clara. Sorry for her as he was, her uncontrolled monotony of grief struck him as stupid and excessive. His own wound, moreover, was still unhealed, and again he turned for sympathy to Lallie.

He found her a trifle more provocative. She teased him gently about his infant practice and his assumed respectability. And little by little a great unrest pervaded him. He thought it was merely dissatisfaction with his prospects and position.

Michael was short of money. The old house was mortgaged, and he had actually lost financially by his mother's death, for it meant the cessation of a pension. In addition, he received a letter from Aunt Kate, who had retired to Bath, informing him that she had lent Mrs. Farrow three hundred pounds and would be glad if her nephew could now discharge the debt.

In a fit of confidence he unburdened himself to Lallie as they strolled one evening along the cliffs.

"I've been awfully near betting, Lallie," he prefaced the confession casually. "Putting money on Spoilt Boy in the Cambridgeshire. I wish I had now, because he won."

She laughed aloud.

"You silly old dear," she said. "Then why ever didn't you? Are you always like that—so prudent and far-seeing? It must be horrid!"

"I have to be," he replied glumly. "But it's just my luck. I'm always checking myself from things, and then being sorry I didn't do what I wanted to. It's happening again and again. I wanted to go to sea once and didn't because of Mother, and now I wish I had. A friend of mine went, and I'd change with him any day. It's the same with this betting."

"Why don't you just let yourself go, Mick?" she whispered. "I should, even if it were to the Devil!"

He looked at her and caught the glow of the sunset in her dark eyes. Suddenly he began to tell her passionately of his old longings and his discontent, of the romantic things that had called to him from afar, of the great unrest that daily grew upon him. She listened attentively to his turgid recital, and then turned to him with a smile.

"I simply couldn't be like that," she said. "I'd do what I wanted to and take the risk. You *are* a queer boy. Fancy your having thought of me in that way when we were children. You ought to consult a fortune-teller about your 'open doors' and things. I know one—a gipsy. She frightens me terribly, Mick, but—what she says comes true. It does really."

By the time they parted Michael had agreed, somewhat to his own amusement, to consult the gipsy.

On the afternoon of the next day Clara astonished him by pressing for an immediate marriage. They

had walked together a little way out of Illington, and sat upon a low hillock by the sea. Clara was sobbing, and those ridiculous great eyes of hers looked into his as if they were horribly afraid of something. He had never known her quite like this, and tried in vain to soothe her.

"Do, Michael dear. Do, do!" was all she kept saying, and for a time nothing could be drawn from her but this. Then she passed from entreaty to lament. "I'm never sure of you, Michael," she moaned, "never sure of you. If you cared for me at all you'd want me like I want you. I'm so afraid of something that would stop us. We could get married at once, if you only would—to-day even, or anyhow to-morrow. We could tell Mother afterwards."

He caressed her, told her not to worry, teased her a little for a leap-year maid, and then left her—for Lallie.

Afterwards that vision of Clara pursued him through many a long day. Clara trying to smile a little through her tears, mopping mechanically at her face with a tiny handkerchief, and gazing after his retreating figure with a look of foolish adoration. He waved his hand to her and felt relieved when a turn in the road hid her from his sight.

Lallie and Michael found the gipsy in a dirty tent on a darkening common. It was obvious enough that the prophetess lived in the squalid little cottage behind the trees and that the tent was merely a piece of stage property, but the effect of the flickering

twilight and the mystic symbols on the canvas sides was none the less weird. Lallie sat on a stool whilst Michael's fortune was being told.

For a few seconds the ancient dame mouthed at him, and then she began to speak in a monotonous drone. Michael gave a sudden start as he caught the first words, and Lallie shot him a glance as if to say, "There—didn't I tell you!"

"Five times and once again. Once again only," the gipsy was saying. "Five times the voice has called and the door stood open. Once more shall the message come and the way lie plain. This is the last time."

Her voice trailed off into a toneless murmur devoid of emphasis, and then suddenly, as Michael was stepping back in wonder, the gipsy's manner underwent a change. Her body grew tense, her eyes glowed, settling upon Lallie with a curious fixity, and she beckoned the girl to approach her. Lallie did so unwillingly, and almost immediately the voice of the wrinkled seer thrilled out in a tone strangely different from her previous chant-like drone.

"For you, too, I see a path. There is darkness—darkness and trouble and a great fear. She who gives herself lightly—lightly shall she be held. For the wanton there shall no——"

"Stop, stop!" cried Lallie, snatching away her hand, which the dame had grasped. "What are you saying? Wake up, wake up, you old fool!"

She stood with blanched face, trembling and enraged.

The ancient raised herself slowly as if from a trance. The light died out of her coal-black eyes, and her face took on a foolish, scared expression.

"Dearie," she said. "Dearie, what was I saying? I don't remember. I told him true about the open door, I did, true as true. . . ." she mumbled fatuously, and attempted a conciliatory smile.

"Come on, Mick. Come out of this," said Lallie, seizing the astonished Michael by the arm and half dragging him from the tent. "She's mad—the old—sot. She's been drinking!"

Gradually, whilst they hurried across the now gloomy common, the meaning of the extraordinary scene was disclosed to Michael, and his heart began to beat wildly.

"Lallie," he said. "Tell me. What was she saying? You know more about this, more than——" Suddenly he put an arm round her neck and pulled her towards him. They stopped dead, and stood confronting each other in the fading light. Her cheek against his hand was burning hot.

"All right, Mick," she said presently. "I'll confess. The spiteful old hag! That's because I didn't give her enough money, I expect. She was complimentary, wasn't she?"

"You mean," he said, "you mean you—you put her up to it—about the open door and all?"

"Yes, Mick. Guess why."

"I—I think I do, Lallie."

"Well?"

He dragged her to him fiercely, and, as the first

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stars came out over the hill, began to kiss her. In a growing passion that had in it more than the seeds of pain he kissed her hair, her neck, her cheeks, her lips. . . . Love for Lallie consumed him as a raging fire.

So he entered the Open Door at last.

III

To leave early next morning and get married in a registry office off the Strand appeared to Michael the only way of dealing with the situation they had created. They left no word, and no one saw them go, but the folk of Illington are quick to scent a scandal. They had "seen it coming for a long time."

Michael disposed of his "practice" and of his two houses through his solicitors, and wired for Mrs. Brent. She arrived with swollen eyes and a huge tin trunk to find them established in a Richmond villa. Michael's brass plate was already answering the sun over the Park with an amiable effulgence, and Mrs. Brent, being aware of his resources to a halfpenny, shook her head and blew her nose. She carried a note from Clara which Michael stuffed into his pocket and afterwards locked up unread in his desk. He said to himself it was no good getting unsettled at this juncture and nothing he could say now could make any difference to Clara. . . .

For about two months Lallie and Michael walked together in the enchanted garden. For just that time did their passion hold, and then, very gradually but

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quite perceptibly, came disillusionment and the apples of Sodom.

It turned out in the first place that five hundred pounds which Lallie had contributed to the enterprise had been borrowed from her father's safe without the formality of his consent. That in itself, to Michael, appeared a detail compared with the significant and humiliating fact that the money had been taken several hours before their visit to the gipsy. He discovered this through a slip of Lallie's which she tried in vain to cover.

Michael had never met Lallie's parents, having always avoided them by instinct, but the unfortunate complication of the stolen money gave them a sort of footing in his scheme of life. Up to then they had made no attempt to make his acquaintance.

On the evening before the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Shrubbs Lallie hinted at something still more disturbing. "Father's sure to give you a wrong idea about it, my Mick, so I'd better tell you. Well, I was taken down to Herriott that second time so as to be put in gaol. One of the silly sons of Daddy's Managing Director had been making an idiot of himself. It was nothing serious, Micky dear, but of course they blamed me. It was Mother who suggested solitary confinement at Herriott. She would."

The parents of Lallie exceeded his worst anticipations. They were flagrantly *parvenus*. The father treated Lallie's theft as rather a good joke, but evidently thought it placed him "one up" as regards Michael. He regaled his son-in-law with the exploits of Lallie—

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which seemed to have been on a considerable scale—and then looked hard at him to see how he would take it. He had a loose boiled eye which he winked at Michael with obvious difficulty. “Don’t you think you’ve got her yet,” he said. “You never can tell *where* you are with that baggage. Don’t I know it!”

Other things followed—hideous things he had never met before—powder and paint, an utter weariness of what was now the humdrum of life, the soul-killing boredom of appetite indulged and desire ended. His parents-in-law affected to treat him as a sort of amusing and unforeseen appendage to their *ménage*. Once he heard Mr. Shrubb refer to him in speaking to a crony as “that comic ’usband of my Lallie’s.” Michael seriously contemplated suicide.

He thought that there was nothing beautiful or pathetic left to him, that all that had seemed or ever would seem lovely must pass, as Lallie’s fascination had, into the garish and the sordid when approached and grasped. No longer could he yearn over the place where the rainbow ended. He had found it, and its foot was planted in mire. His ideals had been debauched, his day-dreams violated. He had lost his faith.

Then, one day, he opened Clara’s letter.

“Dear Heart,” he read. “I do not blame you; though since you have gone, my life has stopped. . . . Of course, dear, I suspected long ago. I wonder if what Mother told you made any difference.” Michael raised his eyes a second from the closely written sheet,

gazed in bewilderment about him, and then read on. "That was why I wanted you to marry me at once—you remember, don't you? I was afraid you would hear from Mother and would change your mind. Michael, dearest, she had only just told me that I was not her child, that I was only adopted, you know what I mean. I was so afraid of losing you. . . ."

For the time he read no more. He found other letters then, letters with the Illington postmark which Mrs. Brent had been ordered to destroy as they arrived. Two from Clara's mother bore out the daughter's statement. The first had been written before he left with Lallie, and had been re-addressed. Mrs. Bishop had "felt it her duty," now that her husband was no more, to let him know. She hoped she was "a woman of principle." . . . Her second letter lashed him as only a letter written by such a woman could.

He rose from the desk at which he had been sitting and looked out upon the rain driving in great sheets up the Thames valley. It was growing dark, but he did not light the lamp. In one hand he held Clara's letter.

He looked down at it and shivered. A terrible misgiving gained upon him. Suddenly, inexplicably, the little sheets of paper seemed to hold something of the peculiar wistful pathos that hung about the last letters of his mother. Tears rose in his eyes. In any case it was too late! . . .

Very definitely he realised the closing of a chapter. He stood with one hand in his pocket thinking over

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the mystery of life. Where should he set his glamour now? It would be difficult to say.

Perhaps it would lie like a vague and shifting light over all that far-back Somersetshire childhood, dear and remote as all spent and irretrievable things are apt to be. Perhaps it would play more definitely about the face he once thought fond and simple, mitigating the large and avid mouth, fining away the crudity of the too-abundant yellow locks, letting the tragedy of love unprized look out of the great, foolish eyes of Clara.

With a sigh Michael turned from the darkening window and lit the lamp.

THE FLYING TOWER

Out along the cliffs from the "Fishers' Joy" to the coastguard station at Bull-Edge you may walk for miles and not remark a human habitation. For as your glance swims up the constant thunderous wind from the bitter North it can rest on nothing but the grey and troubled vastness of the ocean—and inland the far-flung country stretches league on league in endless marsh and sandy waste, uncrossed by road, unmarked by house, as far as eye can see.

Only here and there you will come wondering upon strange buildings that moulder on the bluff and seem to stand aloof in curious detachment in the midst of this scene of utter loneliness.

Of these, some which almost overhang the beach below are recognisable as dwellings long abandoned, and others, tall and tapering, are evidently landmarks for the fishers out at sea. Others yet are to be found of which the meaning is more difficult to guess.

These last are the follies or "nonsense towers," bizarre and grotesque, that stand out with something of the jovial inconsequence of madness upon the lonely cliff. Windswept, fantastic, hurtling up against the leaden sky in starkest silhouette, they seem to accentuate rather than relieve the peculiar desolation of that coast.

It was after walking over to the "Fishers' Joy" from Bull-Edge that I found old "Gentleman" Craske, the ex-coastguard, in the bar-parlour with Silent-John Meek, and, sitting down opposite him

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before the spluttering fire, heard him narrate the peculiar story of the Flying Tower.

"I took a look round outside a moment or two ago," he explained before he began his tale, "so of course I saw you coming along the Way and turning back to look at Them. Funny things, aren't they?"

"Very," I agreed.

"We give 'em names in these parts," he went on. "The high-shouldered, red-brick fellow, he's Jonathan, and the little dumpy chap with his top story missing is Zacchæus. Then there's a tallish one all but over the edge; we call him Zerubbabel. It's funny to give 'em Bible names, isn't it? But the worst one of the lot, he won't ever have a holy name."

"Which one?" I said.

He bent over, whispering, and I could only just catch his reply. "The Flying Tower," he said in a hushed voice. "The one that seems to spring up to the sky and half over the cliff. I'll tell you about it."

I filled my pipe, lit it from his proffered match, and settled down to listen.

"Well, as I was telling you the other day," he began, "when my Granfer Jolly had left me his money, I left coastguarding as soon as my time was up, but I still lived hard by the station. It's the little white cottage under the wireless. I daresay you've noticed it."

I nodded and he continued:

"My first old woman having died, I was seeing about getting another in Littlegift here, and so I used

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to walk over from Bull-Edge a good many times a week.

"Taking that walk along the cliffs as often as I did, it was natural that I should notice the towers. They're peculiar things anyway, and not found anywhere else so I'm told. I've seem 'em at all times of day, and in all kinds of weather, so I know 'em pretty well as you may say.

"One of them, the one they call the Flying Tower, was always different from the rest. There was something about it, I didn't know what it was, that used to fair give me the creeps. I used to hurry by it at night and be glad somehow to put it behind me. And it wasn't long before I found that other folk had much the same feeling about it, so I was more afraid of it than ever.

"There were strange stories about it too. People said something used to live in it and come out along the cliffs when the rain was falling or the fogs were up from the marshes. Not a ghost exactly, but something worse than a ghost, if you know what I mean. A thing with long pale hair and hands like claws!

"For about a fortnight after I was married, I stayed mainly at home and didn't think any more about the Flying Tower, being too taken up like with my new manner of life. After that, though, the novelty wore off, so I used to come over here again to the 'Fishers' Joy' pretty often.

"It was then that I noticed, what I hadn't noticed before, that a man kept walking round the cliffs near the tower or wandering about the beach underneath.

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There used to be a path then going down from the cliff, and once or twice I came upon the fellow turning down this path to get on to the sands. He was always going down, never coming up, so I only saw his back and could never get a glimpse of his face. He would be strolling along smoking hard and at night, when I couldn't see him, I fancied I could smell his pipe.

"One day he didn't turn away quickly enough, and I saw his face. Who do you think it was? It was young Haben from the Manor! I'd seen him once or twice before and recognised him easily enough, though his back view hadn't told me who he was. 'Good-day,' he says in a funny voice. 'A fine afternoon.' 'Yes, sir,' says I, and went on quickly without turning to look back.

"Shortly after that old Haben died, and within a month of his death it was heard that young Haben, who was his only nephew and his heir, was going to marry right away, which shocked folk considerable. I didn't hear very much of the talk that went on about it, because I happened to be away at the time, and when I came back to Bull-Edge, he was all married and done for as you may say.

"And then I found the gossiping and tale-telling going on worse than ever. It was all about the bran-new wife at the Manor, and some things that were said would hardly be fit to repeat. So far as I could make out, something seemed funny about her—she didn't look quite normal—she was pretty with a horrible kind of prettiness same as some evil thing might be, in a way that set you afire and yet made your

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gorge rise all at the same moment, and then she certainly didn't behave normal either from all accounts; and nobody was able or willing to say where she'd come from, or what her name had been before she'd married, or anything about her.

"I fancy that Haben himself got wind of these stories, and actually caught some of the old dames saying awful things about his wife. I believe he made a mighty flare-up and all but turned some of those old talkers off his land, which after all was only natural.

"For some time after that one didn't hear so much said about the new Mrs. Haben. But all the time there were whisperings. If ever I chanced to come in from the station to the village and saw two or three gossiping old pates together, I could reckon pretty well what they were talking about. That kind of thing's never nice in a place, and the tales that do get about on the sly, as it were, are usually much worse than you'd hear if the whole thing was above ground."

The ex-coastguard jolted the ash from his stumpy pipe, recharged it, and lit deliberately. As he had been talking, the windy night had closed about the old inn, and the sudden flare of his match made the face of Silent-John Meek shoot out bright against the corner's gloom.

"There now," said Craske. "There's old Silent over there. He knows all the funny stories that went around, eh?"

The ancient made no reply save a deprecatory motion of his hands. The narrator looked at him for a moment with a smile and then went on.

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"Now I'll just tell you one or two of the things people used to say, so you can see how silly most of them were. I never believed half of what I heard—not then, anyhow, but that's another matter.

"One day I came in to take a bite with Nance Craig, and on the way I ran into a whole mob of old women chattering round a corner. That's a fair number of years back now, and most of those old dears are in the churchyard, but they were lively enough then I can tell you! Of course I mustn't pass without listening to the whole tale, and a right silly old wives' story it seemed to be. One of the maids up at the Manor had set it going, and what do you think she'd been saying? Her tale was that she'd come into Mrs. Haben's dressing room, suddenly as it were, without being expected, and there was her mistress sitting in a chair before the fire, and all covered and smothered and wound about in long pale hair down to her feet! Joyce Marlowe was the girl's name, I remember, and she had her box taken away quietly that very day and left without saying a word, she was so frightened.

"Now that's queer, isn't it? But there were lots of other stories just as strange that got about. One was that any food she'd left over on her plate went green before it got to the scullery-maids, and another was that her nails used to grow so fast she had to cut them twice a day to keep them down. Then there were other things it would be unpleasant in me to repeat.

"Well, things had been going on like this for some time, and we were getting used to having new awful

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tales from the Manor every day, when the nastiest story of all began to get about. It was the worst because it was the most damaging—somehow there seemed to be more in it than in the others, and we kept remembering things that fitted in to show it might be true.

"They began to say she came from the Flying Tower, and a worse thing than that one couldn't say in this place. I don't quite know how the story really got started, though from what I've learnt since, I fancy some of the men began it who knew more about her than they pretended. It seemed to come into everybody's head at the same time, and once the idea was there it stayed. I didn't think there was anything more in it than in the other fairy-tales—at least I didn't till the night I was coming back late along the cliffs to the coastguard station.

"It was a darkish night, and there was a good stiff breeze blowing from the nor'west. I remember looking down from the edge of the Way at the white foam below, and thinking what it'd feel like to fall over—a good ninety-foot drop.

"Suddenly something seemed to spring up out of the bluster and the darkness just in front of me. It glided off and was gone the next moment, but somehow it gave me such a fright that it was all I could do to keep myself from really tumbling over the edge of a big gorge that cut into the cliffs right ahead. That gorge told me where I was—I was dead under that old tower, and what I'd seen was evidently just going there!

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"I walked back home as quickly as I could, and I don't think I was ever so glad to see my Mary Eliza and the two children before. I didn't know that worse was in front of me!

"I'm coming now to the point of my story. I'm going to tell you what happened on the next day, and if I'm not telling you gospel I don't deserve another drop this evening!"

Quickly I refilled from my own jug his empty glass, and again, and with a brooding frown, he took up his tale.

"That next morning I didn't need to go into Little-gift here to find out that something was wrong. I felt it in my bones as soon as I got up, and wasn't a bit surprised when I heard the news.

"Haben and his wife had gone, that was the story. Gone right clean off without a word said. As far as anybody at the Manor knew, they'd gone to bed as usual the night before and left not so much as a hint that they wouldn't be there the next morning. They took no luggage and nobody could understand it. The whole place was immensely excited, but strangely enough it was some time before anybody struck on the idea that had come to my mind at once.

"I knew they'd come to it sooner or later, and sure as might be, by the next day they'd thought of it too. Of course that abominable old tower must come into their heads as it had come into mine, and I must needs be asked to join in a kind of search-party to overhaul it!

THE FLYING TOWER

"After what I'd seen a night or two before I'd come to hate the place, but I agreed, and we set out from the inn here at about four in the afternoon.

"There were five of us—Jacob Pegg and his boy Elijah, Bill Grice, John Meek here and myself. It was a dreary kind of day, and the wind was moaning dismally with a sting of rain about. We reached Melville cliffs where Zerubbabel is at about a quarter to five, and could see the Flying Tower sticking up about half a mile farther on. A few minutes more walking brought us to it, and we went in one by one.

It took a little while to get used to the darkness, for although there is a sort of window high up, it lets in precious little light. After a short time, though, we could make out the walls plainly enough, and at first we thought that that was all there was to see, for the whole place seemed absolutely empty.

"Some of us were for going back, and began grumbling about having walked over all that way to no purpose. It was only old Billiam Grice who wouldn't be persuaded there was nothing there, and kept poking round the walls and rooting about the floor, and asking us to stop a bit longer. We did wait for another five minutes or so while he rummaged round, but at the end of that time we other four went out leaving him to follow us when he chose.

"Suddenly he gave a great shout, and we turned back and went in again to see what he had found. The dusk was settling outside, and in the tower,

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where it was darker still, Billiam had struck a match which he held in one hand, while with the other he pointed at something that was stretched out below his feet.

"He had lifted two big slabs of stone from the floor, and in the hole that they had covered lay a skeleton! I can see it now, all so fine and shiny white in the light of the match, staring up at us with a kind of stupid grin. The hands were folded over the body, and on the left side, which was tilted a little higher than the other, some of the creature's ribs had been broken and bent in. It was an awful looking thing, and Pegg's Elijah, who was really a weakly lad and subject to fits, started back so suddenly that he knocked the back of his head against the doorway. The next moment Billiam's match went out, old Jacob gave a terrible scream, and we all pushed out of the tower and started back for home again as quickly as we could."

The storyteller paused a moment and looked about him. The strangeness of his tale had laid strong hold upon me. I could even see the fantastic form of the Flying Tower and hear the wind whistle on the lonely cliff. Much of the legend seemed to point back to something that had gone before, and it was with a sense of hushed expectancy that I heard the ex-coastguard prepare to weave together the scattered threads of his narration into a single strand.

"That, as far as I know, was the last time any of us went inside the Flying Tower. I suppose strangers have. I suppose that skeleton has gone by this. But

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I shall never go in it. Not after I'd seen what was inside it and heard what was found afterwards upon the beach.

"In the very early morning of the next day it was brought up by the sea, and the waves left it on the sands just below the tower. It was Adonijah Black who chanced on the thing as he came round the bend there. He pushed it back into the water so the ebb might take it clear of the shore and carry it away down the coast before it came up again—a man's leg with the boot on, and all wound and tied and wrapped about in long, pale hair. . . .

"That was all that was ever seen of Haben. His wife was never heard of again either, but the story is that it was through her that Haben came to his end. The Manor passed to quite a stranger, who sold it again almost as soon as he got it. The new owner's tried to do the same, but he's never been able to, so the place is always empty.

"There are several people round who think they can put two and two together about what I've told you. This old Silent knows a lot, but nothing'll make him speak before a stranger. He sits thinking and thinking, and chuckling sometimes too, about what happened before ever I was born—and some of the things he remembers are very queer. . . . He can remember Haben's uncle as a young chap—and Lucy. . . . Come on, you old Silent you, you tell us about Lucy."

The pause that followed was filled by the sudden crumbling of a log upon the fire and by the fierce

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roaring of the wind outside, but from the old man there came no sound.

"He's queer, sometimes," said the ex-coastguard, getting up to go. "He won't tell you. Lucy was a daft lass that lived long back they say, and the old Haben did her wrong, which was a devil's thing to do, her being soft like that. She left the village, but people say she came back and lived and died in the Flying Tower, where her baby was born. And it was that baby that became Mrs. Haben that I've been telling you about—young Haben's own cousin—so folk do say."

I drew a long breath, got up too from my seat, and passed out into the windy night with the teller of strange legends. Silent-John Meek made no stir as we departed, and his wrinkled face seemed to take on a graven immobility—impenetrable, sphinx-like.

"Come on," said my companion, "I dessay you'll come along the Way too—unless you'd rather not pass Them after what you've heard."

We set out together, then, and soon the twinkling lights of the inn had sunk behind us.

"Silent-John, he's ninety-two to-day," said the ex-coastguard. "Perhaps he isn't altogether clear in his wits. It's forty-seven years since she went away. . . . It's natural perhaps that he should be a silent one . . ."

"What!" I said. "What! You don't mean . . ."

He laughed suddenly, and a great gust seemed to catch him and drive his laughter back as slowly he turned his head.

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"Why, yes," he said. "Of course. That Lucy, she was his girl. Well, she had her revenge, too, in a roundabout way! It was her skeleton we found. He's always been a silent one since then."

Slowly, buffeted by the gale, with bent heads, we passed upwards to the cliffs, and so along the Way.

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THE man was now only a couple of miles from the house whither he was bound, and by the time he reached it day would just have broken.

Trudging along the frost-gripped winter lanes, he hardly felt the soreness of his feet or the pain and dizziness that sometimes shot across his head. He rather liked this dizziness and numbness at his brain, when he realised it at all. It helped the illusion that he was walking upon air, suspended somehow between the frozen road and the faint greyness of the sky.

The moon had set about an hour ago, and above him he could just make out the lumpish clouds, floating in a sick and giddy welter. There must be a wind up there to make them swim like that. Their edges were beginning to take on a dirty reddish gleam, the colour of rust.

The man was called John Hawthorne, but now, as he approached the village and the house that lay beyond it, he remembered that he used to have another name. He had been born in that village, gone to school there, and afterwards worked for a time at the house, Caudle End. That was five years ago.

As the thought of Caudle End visited his mind he shot his hand uneasily into his pocket and halted for a moment in his tramp. It was all right. His fingers closed an instant upon what they sought, and with a half-sigh of relief he plodded on again.

Hedges, vague and shadowy, filed past him. Sometimes they slid across and pricked him with their thorns and when he had disengaged himself with a

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weary oath, he found that the side of the road had changed and he was being pricked again. When this had happened twice or thrice, he realised that he must be walking crookedly, and sat down for a moment's rest. Then he rose and staggered on once more.

As he passed through the village it was just light enough for him to see his breath, puffing out about him in a cloud. Here and there a candle or a lamp shone yellow through a cottage window. Near the church he found, with the tramp's instinct, a crust of bread and a forsaken apple-core. He began to gnaw them ravenously, but loathed them suddenly and let them fall.

The trees were showing out now against the windy greyness of the east, and before long he could distinguish the sky-line of the bitter fields. By the time he had topped the slight rise beyond the village, the cat-ice in the ruts of the lane was salmon-tinted, and a quarter of an hour after that, as he turned a corner and entered upon his final mile of road, the wind dropped all at once, and in the distance a long, low-lying group of buildings stood out a stark and utter black before a blood-red glow.

Daylight—and Caudle End!

In front of him, somewhere in the middle distance of the lane, was a gate opening into a field. He had walked perhaps for a minute before he noticed it, but after that it filled his consciousness absurdly.

For one thing, it showed him how slowly he must be progressing, for although he tried to quicken his pace, the gate seemed to slide away before him and he

could not catch it up. He recognised within himself a furtive gladness at its behaviour. Until the moment when he passed it there would be no need for that final bracing and tautening of his weary frame, that last spurring and driving of himself which he dreaded more even than the act for which it was to be the preparation.

After interminable hours he saw there was a figure seated on the gate, and by its skirt he made it out to be a girl or woman.

John Hawthorne smiled, though he knew it was a smile of weakness.

He was thinking that when he got up to her the girl would almost certainly speak to him. He would have to answer her, and that might reasonably delay him a little. It would be funny, too, to stand there talking to her, and she without ever an idea of the thing he carried in his pocket.

He wondered what she would say. In any case, and whoever she was, she could not possibly recognise him. He reminded himself that it would never do for her to recognise him. Recognition in that village and so close to Caudle End would mean taunts and bitter words, perhaps even blows and hounding and pursuit. Old Debb was in the cottage near at hand and might set the dogs on him as once before. And he would be too weak to run. . . .

The words the girl would say to him were gathering an immense importance in his mind. For a moment he even dallied with a thought he knew to be unworthy. Perhaps, if she spoke gently, as the girls of

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that country-side of his knew how, if she did not scorn his rags and his unshaven face, if she had blue eyes to smile at him, he might never go on to Caudle End at all, might even leave the score unsettled and never find a use for those half-dozen inches of cold and gleaming metal about which his fingers closed so often.

Just for a second he gave one great gasp of utter joy, but then his features fell and hardened back into their mask of steeled resolve. Again the dire weariness descended on him. It was no good. He could not cheat himself. The relief for which he yearned could never come by leaving debts unpaid. After walking forty miles. . . .

"Georgie Davis!"

He had come opposite the gate before he knew and she had called him by his name. That name too! After all, he had been recognised. Fear leapt in his eyes and already he had started to run. . . .

"Georgie Davis!"

The voice was gentle.

In another, or in him at another time, the peculiar, almost toneless quality of that very gentleness might have produced a different effect. As it was he heard only the softness and beguilement. It seemed that a miracle had come to him. Stopping in his half attempt to run he turned upon her slowly and then burst into tears.

"Come here, Georgie Davis. Tell me why you're crying."

He approached her with hesitation, for it was now

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light and he was ashamed of his tattered clothes and of his three days' beard.

He found himself speaking:

"I've walked so far. More'n forty mile."

She had pale and rather hollow cheeks and a mass of flaxen hair bound loosely with a green ribbon. She wore only a thin print dress as she sat on the gate in the chilly morning air, yet she did not seem to feel the cold. Her eyes, he could see through his tears, were wide and light and butcher-blue, but, owing to some trick of shadow or accident of posture, he could not fully catch their glance.

He repeated presently with an almost maudlin self-pity:

"More'n forty mile. It's a long tramp."

"Yes, it's a long way. Where are you going, Georgie?"

Suspicion seized him, and he answered her question by another.

"How do you know my name?"

She remained silent a long time, plucking with one hand at the ribbon in her hair, and then replied:

"I remember everybody. I knew you when you were here long ago. I remember all about everyone."

She smiled at him, and something in the monotonous sweetness of that smile distressed him. With a pang he began to wonder whether after all the miracle had not played him false and abandoned him halfway. Once again he was confronted with the horror of his journey's end, and realised, with a dull twinge of shame and self-contempt, how all along those forty

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weary miles he had been hoping and praying for something that might take the power of vengeance from his hands and render his design impossible. Perhaps he had hoped too much. A voice sang drumming in his ears: "Can't turn back now, can't turn back. . . ." Meanwhile the moments slipped away and he stood there faltering and undecided. Despite the bitter cold the sweat gathered on his brow.

Unconsciously he had moved nearer to the gate on which she sat, and with a sudden start felt her arm against his side and her hand within his pocket.

He leaped back, glaring. Fury possessed him. He had clapped his own hand instantly outside the place where hers had been, and though, through his jacket, he was relieved to feel the same hard, familiar outline, his anger did not leave him.

Then he saw that the girl in her startled shrinking from his violent movement had lost her balance on the gate and was falling backwards. She seemed to fall for an eternity of time, and as he watched his rage evaporated. At last she struck the ground with a soft thud and lay for a few seconds in an awkward, tumbled heap. She picked herself up presently and stood, looking at him fixedly. She did not seem to have hurt herself, for on her face the smile still lingered.

Fright had replaced his fury. She had not succeeded in her attempt to rob him, but at any rate she knew now what his pocket held. She was smiling because she was going back over the hill to get old Debb to set the dogs upon him. He turned to flee.

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Then he heard her calling him: "Georgie Davis, Georgie Davis!" and looked back.

Her smile had vanished and her face streamed with tears. "My ribbon," she said. "My ribbon. In your coat."

He thrust his hand within his tattered jacket. For a moment he felt only the cold steel of the revolver, but then his fingers touched something soft and silky, and with a little, wondering cry he pulled out the broad green band that the girl had taken from her hair and stuffed inside his pocket.

He understood it all now, and his heart dissolved in penitence and ruth. A memory of his schooldays visited his mind and brought hot tears springing to his eyes. In that old time the boys had exchanged love-tokens with their sweethearts—perhaps a penknife or a whistle on the one side, and on the other a ribbon or a lock of hair. The poignant recollection unmanned him utterly and he sobbed in fitful, stormy bursts.

"Georgie!" she called again, "Georgie!"

In the bitter morning air and across the gate—that Gate now so stupendous with its weight of symbolism and significance—they kissed, and in the pulsing warmth and glow of that caress the dire purpose that had lain like ice about his heart melted and swam and was no more. . . . The unbelievable had happened. Miracle was accomplished.

She held him long and hard. Her kisses, ravenous and burning, fled about his face with a fiery rapidity of motion that almost resembled the hungry nuzzling

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of a horse. Her breath and her red, tireless lips seemed to lap him at every point like flame and incense. He had never been kissed like that before. . . .

Then he drew back. Perhaps for a second, even in his joy, some faint misgiving crossed his brain, but it faded instantly. She was a wonderful girl and it was natural her embraces should be wonderful as well. His only regret was that he was too weak and tired to return her kiss for kiss.

Out over the hill voices became audible. They were calling to someone: "Nancy, Nancy. . . ."

The girl started away from the gate and backed slowly into the field.

"I'll have to go," she said in hurried, frightened tones. "They'll find me if I don't. Good-bye, Georgie. But I'll come back soon."

For a fleeting instant her face, as it caught the morning light, was turned towards him in farewell, and for the first time he met the expression in the eyes. His own glance somehow shrank and fell before that stare, and when, a second later, he raised his head to look at her, she had already vanished.

And then, opportunely, he happened, almost directly afterwards, upon the travelling coffee-stall.

He had walked for a few paces—on air indeed, yet painfully and with many a stumble because of his still-present physical distress—away from the gate where the girl had left him when, round a hidden turning of the lane it clattered suddenly into his view—a long barrow upon wheels with a polished copper urn steaming at its rear and in front of that a great cyclinder of tin

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from which arose into the frosty air the smell of fried potatoes.

Miracle had come to him it was true, yet in the meantime his stomach was empty and his throat dry. The memory of some few odd halfpence in his pocket struck his mind with the force of a revelation, and presently he was gulping down delicious draughts and cramming his mouth with hot and savoury crisps.

The old fellow who served him gave him a shivering "Good-morning" and was surprised when his customer after returning the salutation subsided into immoderate bursts of laughter.

When the coffee-stall and its proprietor had trundled off towards the village, Davis, sitting down beneath a hedge, began to shout and sing. His soul was shouting too, and his body warmed now to a generous, tingling glow by the hot food and drink.

Nightmare had lifted its last shadows from about him. Near the side of the road lay a heap of building-stones, and the coating of frost upon them, as it moistened and melted and began to run, caught a rosy radiance like the radiance that filled his heart. In this moment of deliverance and joy all that had gone before, his hatred and his ancient grudge, his year-long nursed desire for revenge, the arduous forging of the final bitter purpose in the smoky caverns of his mind, the destitution that had made him desperate and careless of the results of what he planned, the weary tramp of forty miles—all save the sudden and bewildering transport of the reaction from misery to bliss, fell from him as the forgotten terrors of some fevered dream.

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Tears of utter relief and thankfulness coursed down his cheeks.

And for his self-respect he was able to tell himself that it was by something that the girl had been or done that this miracle was wrought.

He sat under the hedge a few minutes longer, and then decided he would get a shave. He still had three-halfpence in his pocket, and now that this scheme had been abandoned it did not matter much where he was seen. As for that he had already passed the time of day with the owner of the coffee-stall. If he went on to the next village it was unlikely that anyone would recognise him and taunt him with what had happened five years back. Then, after his shave, he would return and see the girl again. . . .

Sitting in the barber's chair half an hour later he remembered the ribbon and drew it from his pocket. He held it out between finger and thumb and chuckled with a foolish exultation at the chaff of the man who lathered him. As his hand returned the token to its place he felt the revolver and frowned. He would have to get rid of that before he went much further.

He left the shop and ambled back at ease. He washed his swollen feet in a brook and felt much better. To some extent he was now rested and refreshed. He was able to think.

His mind reverted to the girl and to her kisses. He was stronger now and could kiss as passionately as she. He longed to do so.

He began, curiously, to look back upon those few minutes at the gate with incredulity and a sort of

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glamorous tenderness as upon something that might have happened very long ago but certainly would never come again.

He wished she had not been called away like that. He would have liked to give her some inkling of what he had intended and tell her how she had saved him from himself. He would have struck a figure so. Then they might have walked and talked together. This word "together" gathered about itself a desolating and sentimental sweetness hardly to be borne. And he had been violent with her—with her whose kisses had delivered him. She had even fallen over the gate. How cruel life had been!

Then he remembered the name that had been called to her across the fields—Nancy. He repeated it, slowly and many times, seeking in his brain for some buried hint of memory, some association or forgotten incident that it might recall.

Who was she? The question, now that his faculties were quickened by the hot drink and the food, faced him starkly, as it had not done before. Who, after all, was this girl who had recognised him in spite of his shabby clothes and bristling chin, and had remembered too that old, foolish, sweet tradition of love-making at school? For a moment an image haunted his mind and then faded as he sought to grasp it. Suddenly he frowned.

Glancing up just then he found that in his abstraction he had already passed the gate. The girl was nowhere to be seen. About a hundred yards ahead of him he noticed that the coffee-stall had halted at the

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corner of a lane. The old man was seated by its side, intent upon his breakfast. Perhaps the girl had come and gone again and he could say which way she had taken. At any rate, decided Davis, he would ask.

He hurried forward, stopped and spoke; he asked the ancient if he had seen her; explained that he had expected to meet her; went on, as the old fellow remained silent, to describe her as well as he could; even, in a strange and growing apprehension, showed the strand of dark green ribbon; ceased finally and waited with a beating heart for the reply.

It was then, as he waited, that the winter morning countryside grew dark about him, that the encircling sky-line of the fields changed to a bitter, blackening ring, that the very heavens above him curdled and hardened to a dire, frowning arch. For at last he had seen the reason for the long-continued silence. The old man before him was shaking, shaking with a repressed and voiceless laughter that caused his dirty beard to wag and pressed tears of merriment from his rheumy eyes.

Presently the paroxysm abated and it was possible to catch the words that wheezed and tickled in his throat: "Nancy Clegg . . . Nancy. . . . Nancy Clegg. . . ."

With an oath the other sprang upon him and shook him till at last the laughing ceased and his question could be heard.

"What about her? Tell me, what about her?"

Presently the withered lips began to move and Davis bent his head to listen.

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When at length he raised it he was laughing too, and, a whole minute later, the old man, as he looked up from the breakfast he had calmly recommenced, noted with a mild surprise that his companion was still convulsed by a dry and shattering mirth.

It was not far from the coffee-stall to Caudle End, and Davis, though a little delayed by those constant bursts of laughter, had made short work of the mile or so of field and barren scrub.

Just as half-past eight sounded from the clock above the stables he came upon a man, morning pipe alight, strolling round a corner of the coach-house.

It was the man he had walked so far to see, and he was just turning in to breakfast.

The first shot shattered the pipe and the second whistled through a shoulder. The third was a miss, but the fourth ripped a tear in the jacket and the next found the heart.

As his enemy fell forward dead upon his face Davis noted the time and smiled. It could be little more than an hour and a half since he parted from Nancy Clegg. Well, his backsliding for which she was responsible had been of short duration.

Becoming aware of shouts and cries, he ran. There was good cover under a high wall and then along a deep and frost-bound ditch. He came out at last by the side of a hedge, panting, but on the whole well satisfied. Then, looking up, he frowned.

A little way ahead he saw someone in a print dress. As she neared him he was presently able to distinguish

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the monotonous sweetness of the smile upon her face.

She came up to him and stopped with her arms stretched out towards him. Her silly, wheedling voice began: "Georgie Davis. . . ."

Then, as the sound of thudding footsteps and hardly stifled shouting rose louder on his ears from behind the screening hedge, he remembered he had one shot left in his revolver.

It entered somewhere above her right breast. She stumbled and then fell backwards.

Just before his pursuers burst upon him and surrounded him Davis had time to notice the expression that still lingered on the mad girl's upturned face.

A look of half-surprised disgust crossed his own. Even without that old man's information he might have known her for the village idiot. She was still smiling.

THE END

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